

CONSUMER MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

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February 2014

Wanderlust

Win!

Trips for two to
**Vietnam, Swaziland
and Mexico & Belize**
See pg 4 now...

50 BEST TRIPS FOR 2014



- ◆ Sochi
- ◆ Burma
- ◆ Cappadocia
- ◆ Uzbekistan
- ◆ Costa Rica
- ◆ Niagara Falls
- ◆ Avignon

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Follow us up, up
and away as we
take a team of
readers to
Cappadocia



THE WANDERLUST TEAM

And what they've been
up to this month?



PHOEBE SMITH
♦ EDITOR ♦

Exploring Burma's
mysterious Myeik
Archipelago...
SEE PAGE 28



GRAHAM BERRIDGE
♦ ART DIRECTOR ♦

Admiring our readers'
fantastic Cappadocia
photography
SEE PAGE 44



TOM HAWKER
♦ PRODUCTION EDITOR ♦

Planning his next trip
away now he's been
busy editing Costa Rica
SEE PAGE 94



SARAH BAXTER
♦ ASSOCIATE EDITOR ♦

Speaking to the best
travel bloggers about
how you can start one
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ALEXANDRA GREGG
♦ EDITORIAL ASSISTANT ♦

Learning about Sochi –
Russia's host city of the
2014 Winter Olympics
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MIKE WRIGHT
♦ ART EDITOR ♦

Getting serious
wanderlust designing
our 50 Trips feature
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SUE SPOOR
♦ SUBSCRIPTIONS MANAGER ♦

Manning the phones to
speak to all those taking
up our fab subs offer
SEE PAGE 26



DAISY CROPPER
♦ ASSISTANT WEB EDITOR ♦

Reading all your lovely
letters and tweets – and
getting a little envious
SEE PAGE 90

Welcome



WARNING: the contents of this magazine
will make you want to travel! My wishlist for
2014 was already too long – but then
compiling our annual Top 50 New Trips
(p109) has only increased the torment. No

doubt it will do the same to you; and that's before you read the
Burma, Uzbekistan and Costa Rica features.

One trip I love to do each year is our On Assignment, when we take
keen readers away with us. In 2013 we explored Cappadocia (p44),
and can honestly say that we were blown away by the wonders of the
area. If you want to join, keep an eye on WanderlustJourneys.co.uk

It's hard to believe it, but it's that time of year again when we seek
nominations for the World Guide Awards (p20). So, if you've been
guided by a remarkable person, do make their 2014 by
recommending them.

And speaking of awards I must share some great news, in
December we were awarded the Consumer Magazine of the Year at
the PPA's Independent Publisher Awards. So I just want to take a
minute to thank the team and of course you, our readers, for all
your support.

I hope we'll meet many of you at the Adventure Travel and
Destinations Shows (p21). I know that some of you who are overseas
use them as an excuse to visit London. So, do pop by and say "hello".

Lyn

LYN HUGHES

Editor-In-Chief/Publisher/Co-founder

WHAT'S ON THE COVER?



Subscribers now get
a special and exclusive
cover that showcases
our great travel
photography.
Picked us up on the
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we're now *Wanderlust
Travel* – the same
award-winning content
as the subscriber
edition, but now with
a great new look.



SUBSCRIBE TO WANDERLUST & RECEIVE A FREE £50 VOUCHER

See p26 for details

Wanderlust

For people with a passion for travel

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In memory of co-founder & publisher Paul Morrison

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This issue was brought to you in part by....



ALASTAIR HUMPHREYS

Adventurer and author

As a new year's treat *Wanderlust's* contributing editor shares his thoughts on crossing Oman's Empty Quarter (p10) and starting your own travel blog (p62)

Mountain, desert, ocean or jungle... which are you?

I suppose I ought to say desert after my latest trip! In reality it's whichever is next...

First great travel experience?

Arriving in Africa for the first time, aged 18. I was due to stay for a year. Every single thing looked, smelled, sounded and felt different – it was magical!

Favourite journey?

Crossing Iceland. It is a country of extraordinary beauty, a tough challenge, and a fabulous expedition partner.

Top five journeys worldwide?

Cycling round the world, canoeing the Yukon, rowing the Atlantic, walking across India, swimming the Thames.

Passport stamp you're proudest of?

Turkmenistan.

Passport stamp you would most like to have?

Antarctica / Afghanistan

Guilty travel pleasure?

I love sitting by swimming pools and drinking cold beer.



BEN FOGLE

TV presenter and adventurer

This issue we grill Ben on his latest travels for his new series of *Lives in the Wild* – and his forthcoming stint presenting the coverage of the Winter Olympics in Sochi – and find out his most favourite places around the world (p24)

Mountain, desert, ocean or jungle... which are you?

Ocean. I love the sea. It has a soothing calming influence on me.

First great travel experience?

Latin America. Ecuador.

I lived there for a year when I was 19. It changed my life.

Favourite journey?

Papua New Guinea. One of the craziest, most magical places I have been.

Top five journeys worldwide?

Ethiopia; Tristan da Cunha; Spitsbergen; Namibia; Bolivia.

Passport stamp you're proudest of?

Antarctica. I have two of them now.

Passport stamp you would most like to have?

The moon.

Guilty travel pleasure?

Music. I find it so evocative. I love travelling with music.



MIKE FORBES

Burmese boat skipper

Sailed *Wanderlust* editor Phoebe Smith on an exploration of Burma's Myeik Archipelago (p28)

Mountain, desert, ocean or jungle... which are you?

Ocean. It's in my blood and it's who I am.

First great travel experience?

Madagascar, about 25 years ago. Back then there was no tourism.

I lived in the desert in the southwest, living in a local village, surfing – no foreigners whatsoever.

Favourite journey?

They've all been pretty awesome. Sailing from Cape Town to Europe because it was pretty testing – after two months at sea you lose yourself a little but every time you do it, you find a little more.

Top five journeys worldwide?

Burma, Madagascar, Tanzania, India, Cape Verde.

Passport stamp you're proudest of?

I'm South African, I'm proud of all of them.

Passport stamp you would most like to have?

Afghanistan.

Guilty travel pleasure?

A piece of biltong – any time, anywhere.

Wanderlust Mission Statement

Wanderlust aims to inform and inspire all your travel adventures. We strive to bring you the most trusted and reliable information in the world. That's why we are always upfront about whether our writers have travelled independently or with a tour company. When a tour operator has been used we always try to use those who've scored a minimum satisfaction rating of 85% from readers in our annual Awards and we never guarantee positive coverage. Responsible and sustainable travel is at the heart of everything we do.



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CLIMB TEXAS



FABULOUS FLORA



GRAB A PADDLE



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TEXAS

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February 2014



50 BEST TRIPS 2014

New year, new journeys – here's our pick of this year's freshest trips... from Peru to China and all the places in between. So where will your wanderlust take you?

Cover Stories

109 50 Best Trips for 2014
Mulling over where to go this year and stuck for ideas? Never fear, *Wanderlust* is here! Whether you're a walker, wildlife lover or a culture buff, find out where to go, when, how long for and of course – the price tag – with this our ultimate collection of the hottest new trips for the coming year. From China to Sweden, Australia to the Arctic - there's the perfect trip for everyone in our top picks...

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"Pigeons perched on the glazed domes, which looked like giant Christmas baubles"
Nick Boulos

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"A bright-orange sea anemone waved as two clownfish finned among its tentacles"
Phoebe Smith



"We rose smoothly between the fairy chimneys of Cappadocia, sunbeams stroking the plump cluster of balloons below"
Lyn Hughes

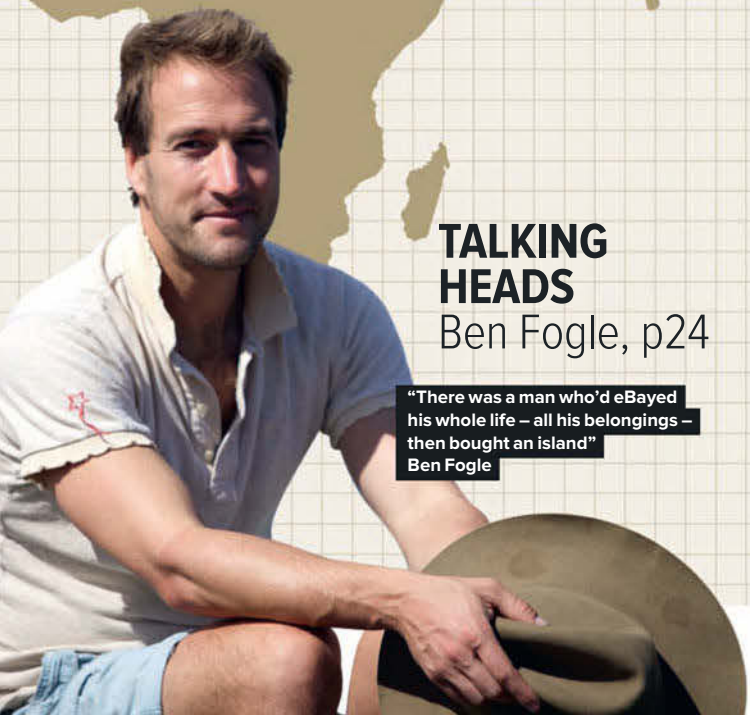
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TALKING HEADS

Ben Fogle, p24

"There was a man who'd eBayed his whole life – all his belongings – then bought an island"
Ben Fogle





360°



V i e w f i n d e r



MT SHUKSAN MAGIC Washington, USA

Photographer: **Grant Gunderson**

There's nothing quite like capturing a perfect moment on camera without meaning to – as photographer Grant Gunderson proves. “We had planned on shooting, but it was storming so hard we ended up just freeskiiing,” he explains. “I had my camera gear with me, and happened to be in the right place at the right time. Just as we got to the top the clouds parted, and I snapped this frame. It was an exhilarating end to a great day.” Grant's spectacular snow scene is the winning signature image of the 38th Banff Mountain Film Festival, which will be touring the UK and Ireland from 30 January to 10 May. It will include 56 screenings, showcasing the latest movies from the global mountain sports community. For more festival information visit www.banff-uk.com





SPIRIT BEAR

British Columbia, Canada

Photographer: **Paul Nicklen**

This distinctive snout belongs to the rare Kermode – or spirit – bear. “This ghostlike bear chose to rest under one of the last old-growth forest patches in the area,” says photographer Paul Nicklen. “This was to be one of my greatest days in the company of the bears.” The image features in Nicklen’s new photography book *Bear: Spirit of the Wild*, which aims to alter the misconception that bears are ferocious killers and fuel conservation work to save the endangered mammals – only 400-1,000 spirit bears are left in the wild. **Paul Nicklen’s *Bear: Spirit of the Wild* (National Geographic, £28) is out now**





WORLD ON PAUSE

Empty Quarter, Oman

Photographer: **Alastair Humphreys**

"Remote, strenuous, daft." These are the words adventurer, travel writer and photographer Al Humphreys uses to describe this rugged image – captured in Oman's vast Empty Quarter. With fellow traveller Leon McCarron, Al hauled a heavy cart across 1,600km of desert, following the path of explorer Wilfred Thesiger for his new film *Into The Empty Quarter*. "It [the shot] involved setting up the camera on the tripod, pressing the self-timer, sprinting to get into my harness and then pulling heroically," Al explains. "There was no smell, except for us. No noise except the wind. A huge, still emptiness, almost as though that part of the world had had the pause button pressed."

Into The Empty Quarter is available now from www.alastairhumphreys.com

■ Readers' Pictures

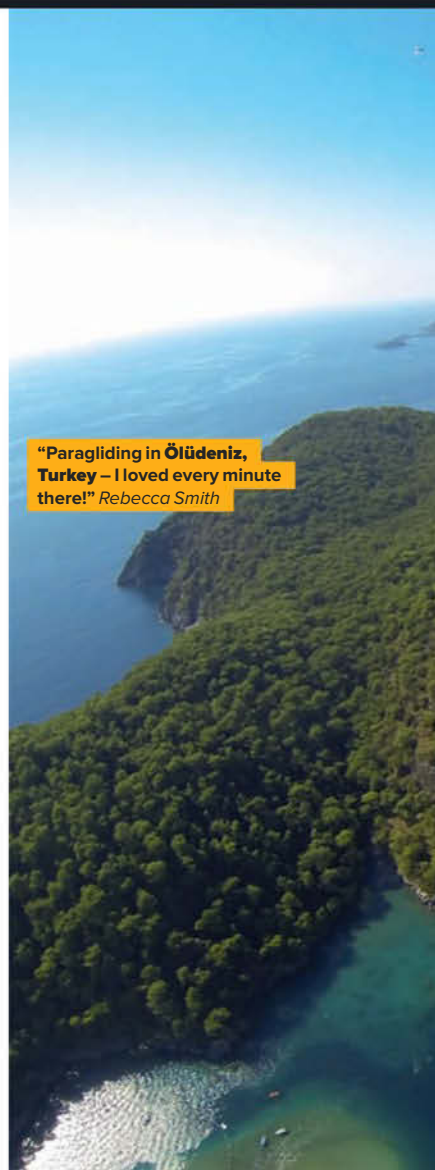
YOUR PHOTOS

Been somewhere beautiful? Done something amazing?

Email fromtheroad@wanderlust.co.uk – make us jealous!



"Nearing the top of **Volcan Villarrica, Chile**, during our round-the-world year. Being home is tough but your magazine is helping plan our next adventure."
Andrew & Carrie



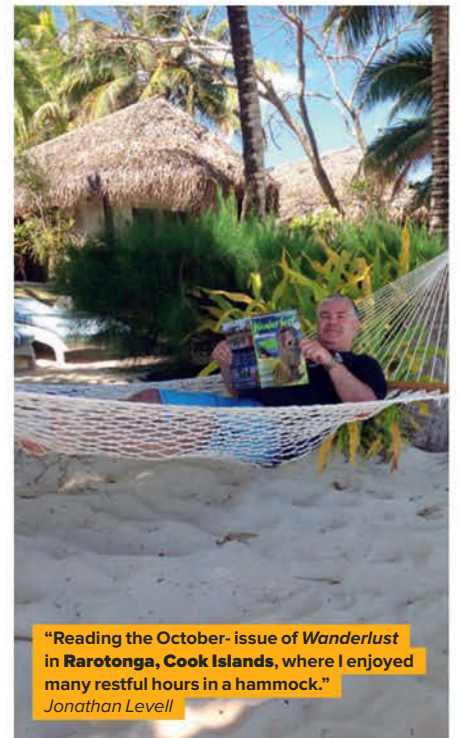
"Paragliding in **Ölüdeniz, Turkey** – I loved every minute there!" *Rebecca Smith*



"Walking in **Zion National Park, Utah**, as part of our trans-American adventure."
Lynda & Robert Newcombe



"Enjoying the views of the **Simien Mountains** during a two-week trip to **Ethiopia**." *Sharon Collins*

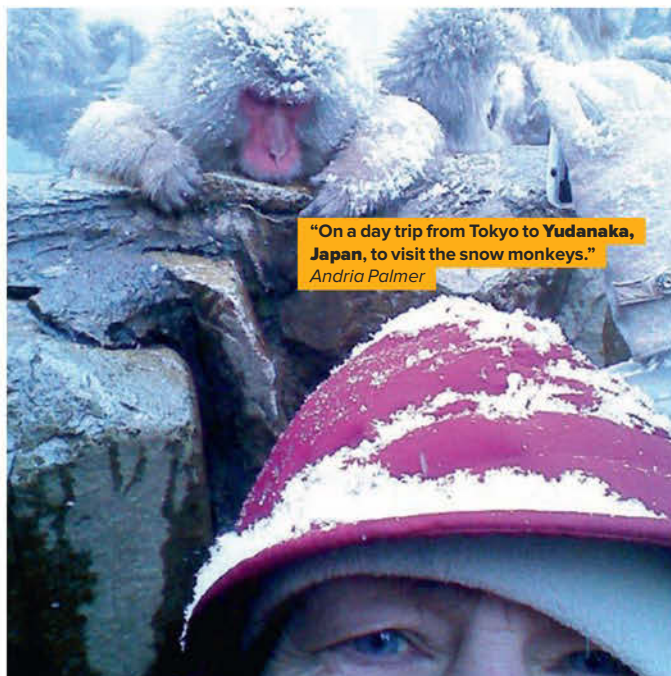


"Reading the October- issue of *Wanderlust* in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, where I enjoyed many restful hours in a hammock."
Jonathan Levell

Where does your *Wanderlust* take you?

Every month we ask 'Where does your *Wanderlust* take you?', giving you a chance to win a goody bag including a versatile **Polar Buff®** – the ultimate travel accessory (RRP £23). But can you do better than Jonathan (*above*)? We want to see where your *Wanderlust* takes you and where you take your *Wanderlust*!

Take your magazine with you on your next trip and share a pic with us. Post it on our Facebook wall, tweet it to us at @wanderlustmag or email it to fromtheroad@wanderlust.co.uk.



"On a day trip from Tokyo to Yudanaka, Japan, to visit the snow monkeys."
Andria Palmer



"Standing at Blue Nile Falls, Ethiopia – near the source of the Nile."
John & Angela Brown

12 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW THIS MONTH...

Your February essentials: from the hottest new destinations to Ben Fogle's travel tips, Vietnamese snacks, Russia's Sochi & more



1 ■ New Frontiers Space travel is set for take off

2014's most exciting travel destination is *space*. As Virgin Galactic quite literally launches, we ask what a visit to the stars involves (answer: £150,000)

Is this the final frontier of travel? This year, ordinary (of sorts) folk will finally have the chance to venture beyond earth – perhaps the ultimate trip in adventure travel – as Virgin Galactic hopes to launch 670 tourists into the cosmos.

"We're offering the experience at a revolutionary price," says Virgin Galactic's commercial director Stephen Attenborough, justifying the \$250,000 (£153,000) ticket cost. "A flight is part of a multi-day life-changing experience. We're offering people the chance to achieve their lifetime dream."

But don't think that the sky-high price tag means luxury. There will be no toilets, no hand-luggage space and no electronic devices allowed on board. The vessel will simply climb to 50,000ft before the rocket is released, sending you hurtling into space.

"The flight is a sensory overload," says Stephen. "Accelerating vertically at 3.5Gs, looking at the earth in zero gravity from space will be all the inflight entertainment you'll need. For legroom – think float room."

Still, that is a *lot* of money and not everyone is convinced. "I'm one of those ordinary mortals who'd rather spend £153,000 on a hundred terrestrial trips-of-a-lifetime," says BBC *Coast* presenter Nicholas Crane. "My first adventure cost £100 and took me on a bicycle from England to Greece."

So how else could you travel with that cash? Well, you could stay in Wanderlust's local

Travelodge for 5,105 days! Or how about living out the rest of your life (or 84 years at least) in a Bangkok hostel? Alternatively, spend 14 weeks in the one-bedroom suite of

Dubai's seven-star Burj Al Arab Hotel; fly around the world 178 times with STA Travel; or cross Russia 36 times on the Trans-Siberian Railway. And you'd never have to worry about UV again: as it would buy you around 17,019 bottles of sun cream.

So, while going into space might literally turn your world upside-down, for those who can't justify spending thousands in 2014, remember: there's plenty to see on planet earth. *Wanderlust*, over and out.

'The vessel will climb to 50,000ft before the rocket is released, sending you hurtling into space'

Galactic adventures
Those with £150,000 to burn can turn their dreams of space into zero-G reality this year

■ The Nitty Gritty What will a space flight actually be like?



According to Virgin Galactic's Stephen Attenborough, you'll begin your space journey with an

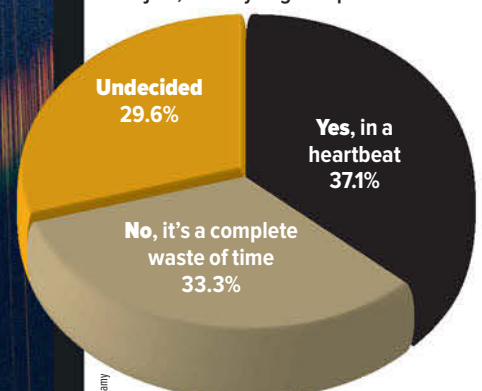
intensive three-day training programme at Spaceport America in New Mexico. Here you'll learn how to make the most of your time in microgravity and get to know your five fellow 'astronauts'.

On the trip itself, SpaceShipTwo will take a 45-minute ride up to 50,000ft (15km), attached to WhiteKnightTwo. The main spaceship will then be released, igniting its hybrid rocket motor and racing skywards at a positively eye-watering 4,020km/h.

Once SpaceShipTwo has broken through the earth's atmosphere, you'll spend the next few minutes overcome by the silence and exhilarating weightlessness of space. Everyone has a window seat, with two large viewing panes. The cabin will also have plenty of somersaulting space for zero-gravity fun.

Shortly after motor shutdown, the spaceship adopts its re-entry configuration, rotating its tail upwards and drawn by the earth's gravitational pull. On re-entry there is a gradual onset of gravitational force that reaches about 6Gs. The glide home is at 290km/h from about 50,000ft (15km), finishing with a conventional runway landing.

■ Online reader poll
We asked you: if money was no object, would you go to space?



■ New Routes

GO NOW...

Standing out
The Carlton
Centre dominates
Jo'burg's skyline



2 BA supersizes Johannesburg route

Why go?

Johannesburg isn't just the largest city in South Africa, it's the key transport hub for southern Africa. Fly here and it's easy to fly onwards, opening up myriad possibilities. And with British Airways introducing new Airbus A380s on its direct Heathrow/Jo'burg route, it's never been easier to get here.

Not just a staging post, the 'City of Gold' is a vibrant metropolis in its own right. With all eyes on the region following the sad loss

of legendary Nelson Mandela, it's a great place to head to for a history lesson. Visit the Apartheid Museum and National Museum of Military History; head to Constitution Hill – home to the Old Fort Prison Complex where Mandela was briefly imprisoned. Gaze over the city from the 223m Carlton Centre, and take a tour of the Soweto townships.

Then head 65km north-west to the Magaliesberg mountains, a chain of hills perfect for hiking.

Where to stay?

Comfortable Marion Lodge (www.marionlodge.com) is in the heart of Sandton, within walking distance of Nelson Mandela Square; doubles from £37pn.

Get there now!

Flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg on BA's new Airbus A380 launch 12 February. Returns cost from £869 return; flight time 11 hours (www.britishairways.com).



Or how about these...

Ryanair's new flights from **London Stansted** to Moroccan capital **Rabat** (£28.99 one-way) and **Bordeaux**, south-west France (£24.99 one-way), start on 5 and 6 February respectively; www.ryanair.com.

Get a new perspective on Warwickshire's romantically ruined **Kenilworth Castle** in the UK – from February internal viewing platforms, up to 18m high, will open to visitors. Entry costs £9; www.english-heritage.org.

■ Travel Gear

3 BUY THIS...

Swarovski Optik
CL Pocket 8x25 Binoculars
£540, www.swarovskioptik.com



Swarovski bins might have a hefty pricetag but, with binoculars, you tend to get what you pay for. This new compact pair has high-quality lenses that deliver super-sharp, high-contrast, colour-true images. Better yet, they fit in your pocket and weigh just 345g – perfect for travellers.

■ Film

4 WATCH THIS...

The Railway Man
In cinemas now



Traumatized from his time as a POW on the Thai/Burma railway during WW2, Eric Lomax (Colin Firth) goes on a journey to come to terms with his brutal treatment – gently prompted by his new wife (Nicole Kidman). Filmed in Thailand, Queensland and Scotland, this is a soulful adaptation of Lomax's powerful autobiography.

■ Television

5 RECORD THIS...

Hidden Kingdoms
BBC1, January TBC / BBC iPlayer



Big planet, small worlds: the BBC's Natural History Unit combines with Stephen Fry's mellifluous narration for this three-part series that explores some of the mini-verses of the natural world. Get a look at life in the city, jungle, desert and forest from various animals' perspectives – from chipmunks to dung beetles.



Experiences words can't describe. Memories a camera can't quite capture.

Adventures aren't found in magazines.

We can't describe your dream trip on this page.

But with over 50 years' experience, our own people and expedition vehicles all over the world, we can help you discover it.

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World Food

EAT THIS...



6

Vietnamese is the new Thai

First we got the Chinese takeaway. Then every pub started serving Thai. But now Vietnamese is the coolest Asian cuisine. With celeb chef Bobby Chinn releasing his latest guide to Vietnamese food – to coincide with the opening of his first restaurant in London (Soho's The House of Ho) – we got the urge to tuck into the trendiest taste in Asia.

So what sets Vietnamese food apart? It's the combination of the simple and the sublime: light, unfussy, healthy food, with a flavour-packed punch of fresh herbs and spices; a delicate balance of heat, sweet, sour, salt, bitter. Expect veg and meat dishes to zing with lemongrass and tamarind, galangal and ginger, cinnamon and coriander, charred chillies and mustard seeds. Oh, and expect generous glugs of salty fish sauce,

which crops up in everything from soups to salad dressings.

Rice is essential. Vietnam is one of the world's largest exporters of the grain – second only to Thailand – but keeps a fair amount for itself. White, sticky, glutinous, fermented: rice is the anchor of a family's daily meals, particularly in poorer regions. Try it as *banh cuon* – a pork- and mushroom-filled rice-batter roll.

There are influences from China – especially in the broths and stir-fries of the north – and whiffs of wider South-East Asia. But there's also a French feel, evident in the delicious and ubiquitous *banh mi* (baguette sandwiches).

King of all, though, is *pho* (pronounced feu). This broth of beef and noodles, heady with ginger, cinnamon and star anise, is eaten at all times, in all places, and is generally delicious – the taste of Vietnam.

TOP TIP

Invest in a mandolin grater. Vietnamese dishes often include thinly sliced ingredients – this handy tool can dramatically reduce time spent labouring in the kitchen.

CHICKEN WINGS IN CARAMEL SAUCE

Serves 3

For the caramel sauce

200g brown sugar
4 teaspoons fish sauce
500ml hot chicken stock
1 chilli cut in half
1 teaspoon lime juice
1 small cinnamon stick or
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (optional)
1 teaspoon black peppercorns (optional)

For the chicken wings

700g chicken wings
20g fresh ginger, finely shredded
½ teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons fish sauce
1 teaspoon ground black pepper

Method

1. To make the caramel sauce, put the brown sugar in a pan over a medium heat and cook slowly until melted. Turn the heat up and stir. Once the sugar is a bit darker, turn the heat down and add four tablespoons of fish sauce, the chicken stock, the chilli and the lime juice. Add the cinnamon and peppercorns to create a little heat if desired.

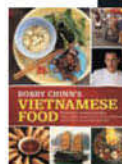
2. Add the shredded ginger to the caramel sauce, along with the salt, sugar, remaining fish sauce, pepper and 500ml of water.

3. Bring the mixture to the boil then reduce to a low heat.

4. Cut each chicken wing into three main pieces. Add to the sauce. Simmer for 30-40 minutes, stirring occasionally.

5. Skim off any excess fat and serve the chicken on a bed of Asian slaw or mixed in with rice and vegetables.

Recipe taken from Bobby Chinn's *Vietnamese Food* (Conran Octopus, £17.99; www.octopusbooks.co.uk)





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■ The Big Debate

It's official: Egypt is back on the map. At the time of going to press, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) relaxed travel restrictions to Luxor and Aswan, meaning Brits eager to explore Egypt's highlights have the green light. Flights from London to Luxor will resume in February and tour operators are ready to go, but given the turbulent landscape of Egyptian politics – particularly with elections due in February or March – the situation can change fast, leaving you with a tough choice. So we've been asking readers and top travel bods: should you always follow FCO advice?

A brown suitcase is shown open, revealing a collection of items packed inside. On the left side, there is a stack of books, including a thick grey one and a thinner orange one. Next to the books are several folded items of clothing in various colors like pink, yellow, and blue. On the right side, a wide-brimmed straw hat with a dark band is placed, with a pair of sunglasses resting on it. The suitcase has a plaid pattern on its interior lid and a metal handle in the center.

But reader Mark Chadwick argues you should go with what's advised: "You expect the FCO to know best – they should have a broad knowledge of the political situation and any ongoing or potential dangers."

Australia, says: "If the FCO or equivalent rules it's not safe to travel, we usually cancel or re-route tours. However, with passengers from Australia, the UK, US and elsewhere, it can be complicated if there are conflicting advisories."

YES



“In cases of non-terrorist threats – such as civil unrest or natural disasters – we will advise against travel when we consider the risk is unacceptably high. In the case of terrorism we will only advise against travel if we judge the threat is sufficiently specific, large-scale or endemic to affect British nationals severely.”

NO



“We take calculated risks based on the knowledge we gather from lots of sources.”

8 *Wanderlust*
Guide Awards
do good!

75,500

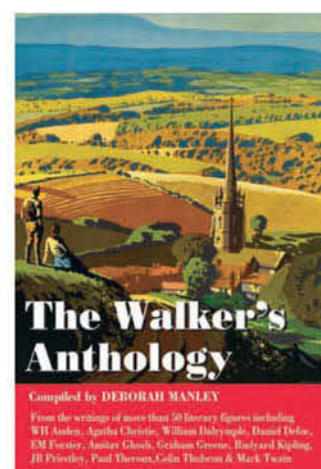
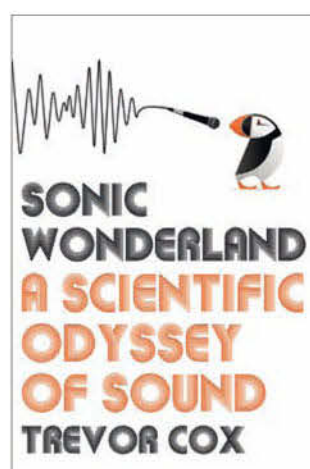
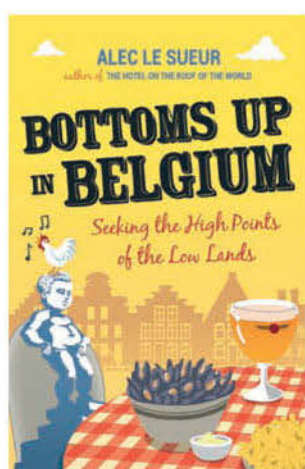
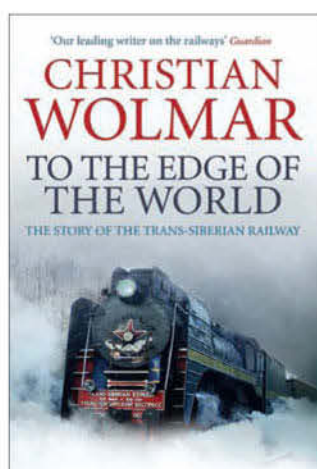
50

8

4,000+

46

Started in 2006, in memory of *Wanderlust* co-founder Paul Morrison, the annual World Guide Awards honours the people in travel who really make a place come to life – as nominated by you, the travellers who use them. The winners each receive bursaries to spend on their chosen worthwhile projects. If you've experienced a world-class guide show your appreciation by nominating them at www.worldguideawards.co.uk



9 Read this... Belgium is (probably) not dull

This month's books: Russian rails, Belgium beer and acoustic adventures

The Trans-Siberian – having helped kick off the Russian revolution – can truly claim to have changed the modern world; it certainly bears the weight of history on its rails. Thankfully, Christian Wolmar's easily digestible and entertaining biography of the route, *To The Edge Of The World* (£22, Atlantic Books), is less unwieldy than its subject matter, charting the Trans-Sib's journey from remote rails to travel classic.

Alec Le Sueur's latest has a trickier sell. *Bottoms Up In Belgium* (£9, Summersdale) aims to get to grips with Europe's favourite

punchline. Is Belgium really as boring as its 'nul points' reputation? Well, Le Sueur doesn't make the case for it watertight – and some chapters definitely take on water – but it's a mischievous jaunt through pissing boys, sublime beer and arcane EU bureaucracy.

We'd usually send a science book packing on the first train to Brussels, but acoustic boffin Trevor Cox's *Sonic Wonderland* (£20, Random House) explains what we hear *when we travel*. His rather accessible 'scientific odyssey of sound' explains why certain buildings and landscapes – such as the singing sands at California's Kelso Dunes or

'chirping birds' of Chichen Itza's Kukulkan Pyramid – make the noises they do. There are even links to samples, so you can hear what he's talking about. Sounds good to us.

No science is required for *The Walker's Anthology* (£10, Trailblazer). Compiling strolling nuggets from over 50 great writers – Bryson, Twain, Dickens, Hardy – it's a Quality Street box of trekking delights without an orange crème in sight. It's pocket-sized too, so maybe the Kendal-mint muncher in your life can dip into it for inspiration while on the hoof or – more likely – browse through it when ruminating on their next ramble.

10 What's On UK EVENTS

ADVENTURE TRAVEL SHOW

London, 25-26 Jan
0871 230 7159

www.adventureshow.com

London Olympia. One day £8/10 adv/door; weekend entry £12/15 adv/door; half-day travel writing/photography seminars: £55 for one, £90 for two, £160 for all four (includes show entry)

Meet the first person to reach the North and South Poles on foot and the first person to lead an unsupported traverse of Antarctica: Britain's most intrepid explorer, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who headlines on 25 January. Add to that *Wanderlust's* Travel Writing and Photography seminars and the chance to come say hello to the team and you have a weekend that's not to be missed!

DESTINATIONS: THE HOLIDAY & TRAVEL SHOW

Manchester, 23-26 Jan
London, 6-9 Feb

0871 230 7141

www.destinationsshow.com

EventCity Manchester: £7.50/9 adv/door. Earls Court, London: £11/13 adv/door. *Wanderlust* subscribers will have received two FREE tickets in THIS ISSUE. All *Wanderlust* readers can get two FREE tickets (£1.50 booking fee) by booking with code 'DES1' at destinationsshow.com.

Want to uncover the secret to having an adventure in 110 different countries? Simon Reeve's your man. He'll appear alongside Julia Bradbury and Jeremy Bowen at this year's show. On Thursday *Wanderlust* will be revealing the winners



of our Reader Travel Awards (as voted by you), and on Friday we announce the results of our Travel Photo of the Year comp at our photographic exhibition!

ROYAL SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

Various dates/venues throughout Feb
01738 455050, www.rsgs.org

Entry £8/free adults/students. Locations vary from talk to talk.

Hardcore adventurers and casual travellers have plenty to get excited about north of the border. RSGS talks

cover everything from the science behind cartography to the journeys of some of the world's most famous explorers. Better yet, the Talks Programme visits 16 venues across Scotland in 2014. For a full list of February meetings, dates, times and locations, visit rsgs.org.

LIVING WITH CHEETAHS: HOW HUMANS AND WILDLIFE CAN FLOURISH TOGETHER

London, 11 Feb, 7pm

www.rigb.org, www.cheetah.org.uk
Royal Institute of Great Britain: £25 inc free drink. All proceeds will go to the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF).

Teeming with lion, leopard and cheetah, the Masai Mara is the lifeblood of Kenya. And you can find out exactly what it's like to live there, amid rare big cats, when wildlife photographers Jonathan and Angela Scott share their heart-stopping experiences of the African reserve. Dr Laurie Maker, founder of the CCF, will also talk about the charity's plans to provide a strong future for cheetah. A great night out for a very worthy cause.

Instant Expert

KNOW YOUR... SOCHI

Snow problem?
Olympic visitors arriving at Sochi's port might be surprised at the temperatures



11

Flung into the spotlight by the upcoming Winter Olympics in February, there's so more to Russia's Sochi than meets the eye

Nestled on the coast of the Black Sea, home to pebble beaches, botanical gardens and Stalin's first *dacha* (holiday home), Sochi isn't your typical tourist hub. It's often forgotten amid Russian giants such as Moscow, St Petersburg and Vladivostok, but from 7 to 23 February, that will all change.

Why should I go?

Well, first and foremost, for February's Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. Watch skaters cut through fresh ice while skiers hurtle across the mountains. And let's not forget the perilous bobsleigh: Russia has created a bespoke track. The Olympic Park, overshadowed by the jagged Caucasus Mountains, boasts several stadiums.

Visitors can also enjoy romantic seafront strolls, yachting, horseriding and hikes. Subtropical temperatures range from 11-18°C in the winter to a balmy 25-29°C in summer

– perhaps making it an unusual choice for the Games. The lack of snow or wet weather has even prompted concerns about the venue's viability, but organisers have stored 450,000 cubic metres of last year's snow to make sure the events go off without a hitch!

How do I get there?

UK flights to Sochi, via Moscow or Turkey, cost £140 one way with Pegasus (www.flypgs.com/en). If you're going to the Games you can hop on the Spectator Transport System. It will run between the Olympic Park and nine stops – including Sochi International Airport. Outside of Olympic time, transfer to hotels by taxi, shuttle or the Sochi Aeroexpress, which departs ten times a day for 200 roubles (£3.80).

What should I do there?

In the 1930s, a typical Russian holiday involved relaxing at one of Sochi's many sanatoria – health retreats set in beautiful

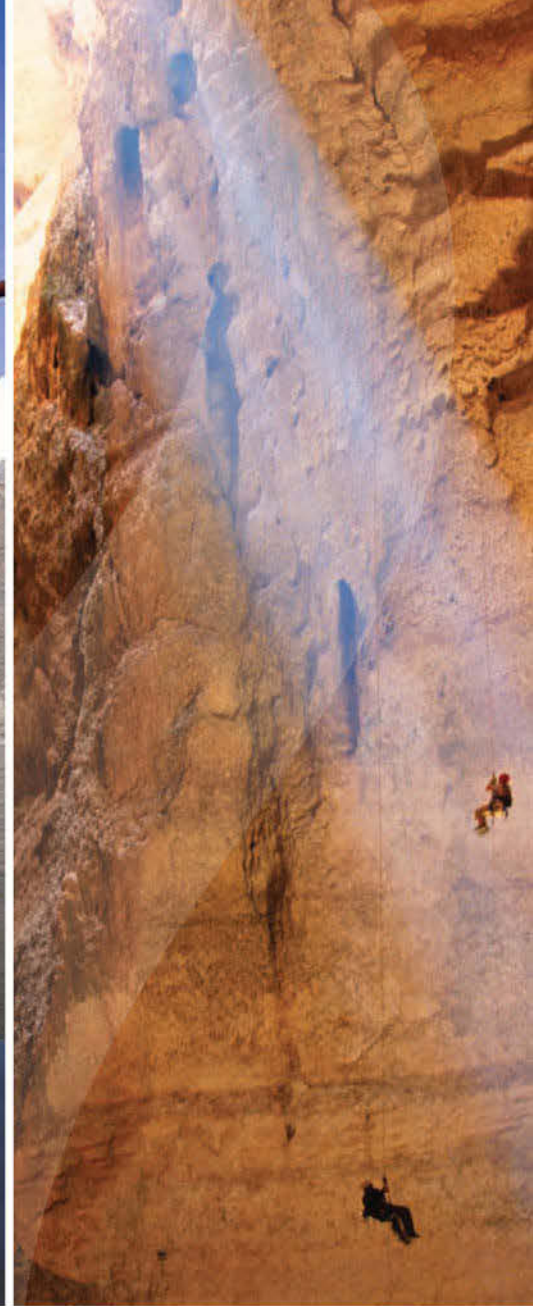
grounds with tennis courts and private beaches. Today the experience is much the same, making the city an ideal spa spot.

History buffs won't want to miss Zelenaya Roscha, Stalin's *dacha*. The interior of the building has been meticulously preserved so that the presence of the Soviet dictator can still be felt – especially when stood next to his eerie, cigar-smoking wax model.

For panoramic views of the city, head for the observation tower on Akhun Mountain. Other nearby must-sees include the waterfalls in the Agura Valley and the confounding Vorontsovskaya Caves, 40km away.

What else should I know?

Sochi has a population of 343,000 people and is in Krasnodar Krai, south-west Russia. Go to <http://tickets.sochi2014.com> for Winter Games tickets, and a mandatory 'Spectator Pass'. You must apply in advance for a Russian visa (£50 plus service charges).



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Natural beauty, fascinating traditions and heartfelt hospitality make Oman a country you really should get to know better. From a variety of beach resorts to sleeping under the stars in the desert, Oman's diverse landscapes will take your breath away. Adventure seekers can explore some of the world's largest caves, discover spectacular diving spots or simply watch the world float by aboard a dhow. Vibrant souks sell traditional silverware, spices and Omani dresses, providing explorers with colourful impressions, and hagglers with timeless souvenirs. Treat your senses to an adventure with a difference.



Beauty has an address

For more information on Oman please contact:

Oman Ministry of Tourism UK & Ireland Representative Office

Tel: 0208 877 4524 | Email: oman@representationplus.co.uk | Visit: www.omantourism.gov.om

Study: www.omanacadamy.com



Ministry of Tourism

Yes man!
Since being marooned with 36 others on the Scottish island of Taransay for BBC series *Castaway*, Fogle has become one of adventure travel's most famous faces



12 ■ Five minutes with... WHY BEN FOGLE CAN'T SAY NO

From crossing the Empty Quarter to presenting the Winter Olympics, Ben Fogle is a busy man. But, he tells us, he's also one of the luckiest...

You're back home – where have you just been?

Panama. I've just finished filming a new series of *Lives in the Wild* [Ben meets people who've turned their backs on the daily grind]; I also went to the Indian Himalaya, the Philippines and the Florida swamps. The last series really captured people's imaginations – everyone wants inspiring alternatives to their lives. There was a man who'd eBayed his whole life – all his belongings – and then bought an island; it makes you think, could I do that?

Could you?

I suppose so, though now my kids are getting older it becomes harder. But I like the thought.

You're known for really adventurous journeys – is that what travel means to you?

For me travel comes in three tiers. The first is on the geographical level: picking a destination and going to see what it's like – for example, walking around Lisbon, exploring the Azores.

On the second level, there's travel that's intertwined with

people: taking a gap year and volunteering, or living with a family to really become a local.

Then there's the adventurous type – taking on an environment on a physical level. You don't just see the Sahara but you race across it. You don't just visit Tanzania but you climb to the roof of it by summiting Kilimanjaro.

Do you have a favourite of those three?

I love them all and I'm so lucky as I can go back and see places on different levels. I went to the

Sahara on a holiday and got to see the ruins and meet the Bedouin communities. But then I went back and ran across it in the Marathon des Sables.

You're an ambassador for the Azores – what attracted you to them?

I love that they're part of Portugal – a place we all think we know well – but out in the Atlantic are these extraordinary islands that offer a wild, natural beauty. There's whalewatching and geothermal activity, which

means you can eat food cooked in underground ovens or take a dip in a natural hot spring. And there's climbing Pico – the highest point of the chain: from the summit, you can see thousands of miles of ocean.

Is it being out in the wild that really appeals to you?

It really is – I love getting off the beaten track. Going [to the Azores] really exceeded everything I could want from a holiday. It's no secret that I love islands, obviously I lived on one in [BBC series] *Castaway*. In my first travel book, *The Teatime Islands*, I visited the remaining islands of the British Empire including the Falklands, Ascension Island and Saint Helena – and I love finding places that surprise you.

Which are your other travel favourites?

I love Iceland – which, if you think about it, the Azores is kind of a tropical form of, with all the geothermal activity. Both are very outdoorsy and earthy.

Portugal's become a favourite. My late grandmother-in-law lived there and I got married there. I love Lisbon and the rugged Atlantic coast – you get the weather but not the crowds.

Bolivia is incredible. I went there first 20 years ago. Then there's Namibia, Papua New Guinea and the Indian Himalaya. Also I took Ludo [Ben's son] to Mozambique – that was the most magical family holiday; seeing adventurous travel starting to emerge was amazing.

If you analyse the places I like, they are all wild and rugged with fascinating people.

Are there many places still on your wishlist?

Lots. Vietnam and Cambodia – in particular Angkor Wat. It will happen, eventually.

Is travel always for work?

I never take real holidays – but I do love to write. I suppose it's

'I went to the Sahara on a holiday and got to see the ruins and meet the Bedouin communities. But then I went back and ran across it in the Marathon des Sables'

how I mitigate my guilty conscience about my carbon footprint. If I write or film something, then I'm showing a place so others don't have to go, though I know it also inspires others to travel there.

Any expeditions coming up?

I did an expedition with James Cracknell in Oman's Empty Quarter for the BBC [available on iPlayer - *Ben & James vs The Arabian Desert*]. We followed in the footsteps of Wilfred Thesiger [who crossed it twice in the 1940s] on camels in full traditional clothing.

What's next?

I've done so much travel in 2013 that I want to spend some time in the UK. We don't take full advantage of what we have in our own backyard. I think the Outer Hebrides is the most magical place on earth. If there wasn't the issue with the weather and the midges it'd be one of the most crowded places in the world.

Aren't you heading to Russia?

Oh yes – I will be presenting the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February! What can I say, I love travel so much I find it impossible to say no... I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd have a job where I could do what I do. It's like winning the Lotto.

Ben Fogle's brand new series of Lives in the Wild is coming soon to Channel 5



Dingo CEO, Australia

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A photograph of a seal on a beach. The seal is on the right side of the frame, facing left with its mouth wide open in a 'yawn' or 'shout' expression. Its body is dark brown and wet, reflecting the sunlight. The background shows the ocean with waves breaking onto the shore, creating white foam. The sky is not visible.

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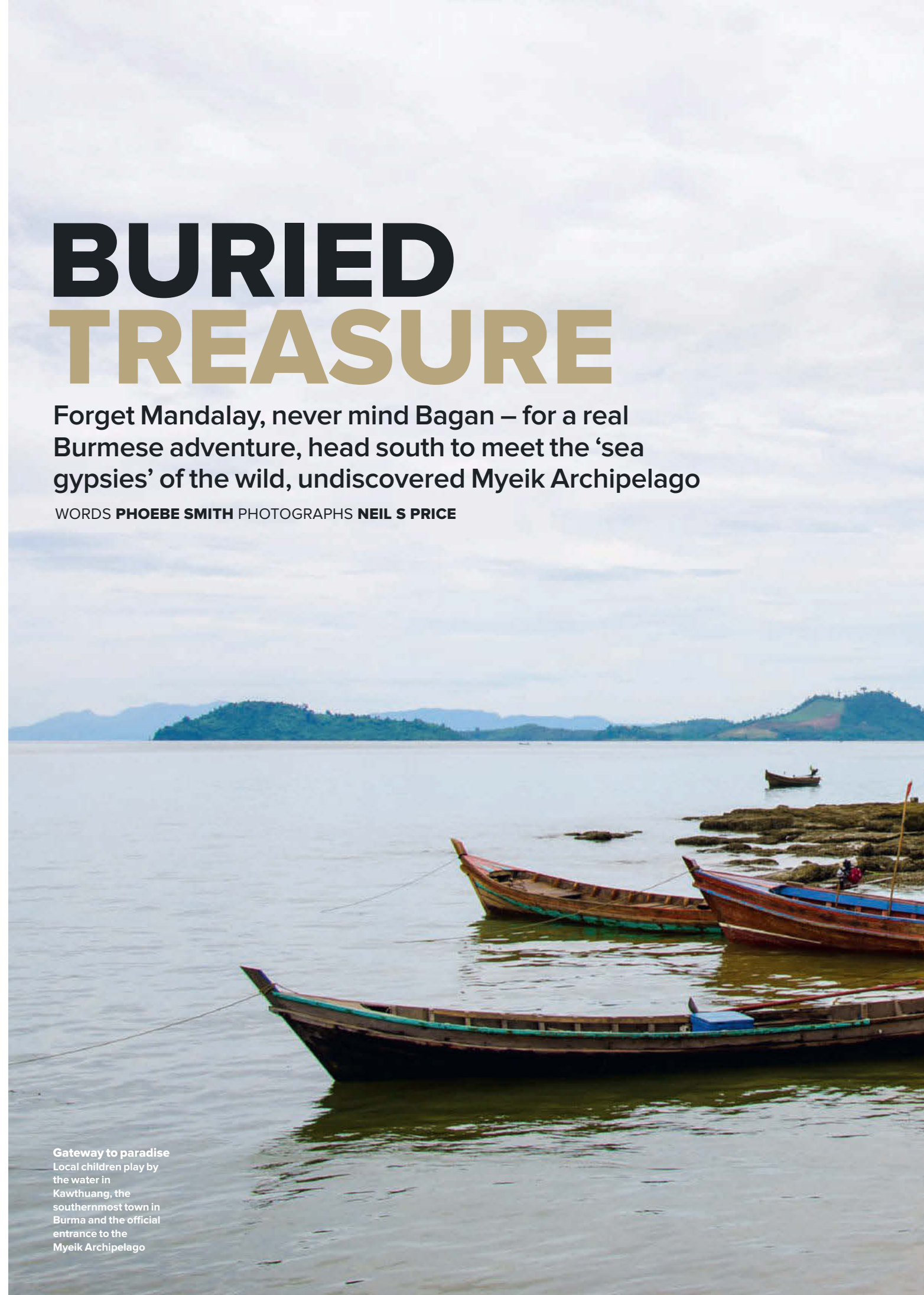
BURIED TREASURE

Forget Mandalay, never mind Bagan – for a real Burmese adventure, head south to meet the ‘sea gypsies’ of the wild, undiscovered Myeik Archipelago

WORDS **PHOEBE SMITH** PHOTOGRAPHS **NEIL S PRICE**

Gateway to paradise

Local children play by the water in Kawthuang, the southernmost town in Burma and the official entrance to the Myeik Archipelago





Little enlightenment

A young monk smiles for the camera in Kawthuang; (right) the Buddhist Pyi Taw Aye Paya Temple in the centre of town and its 28 Buddhas





Warm salt water tickled at my toes. The gentle lap played in rhythm with the dinghy's engine, while a lazy breeze rocked the nearby trees. It was a scene so perfect I felt I'd been sucked into a travel brochure. Here I was about to jump off into the unknown, to explore a coral reef that potentially no one else ever had. But, for a moment, I hesitated.

The ripples distorted whatever lurked beneath into a swirling mass of colour. No one could advise what exactly lay in this undiscovered otherworld. Eventually I would have to summon the courage, hold my breath and just take the plunge.

It could have been a metaphor for my whole trip: diving headfirst into the unknown. I was in Burma for nine days to experience a different side of the country, one few travellers see. On my itinerary there would be no sunrise over the misty forests of Bagan, no golden temples of Mandalay, no slow drift across Inle Lake. After a brief but obligatory encounter with the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon I had travelled south – as far south as you can go before you hit Thailand – to the border town of Kawthaung. But the adventure had only just begun.

Setting sail

In Kawthaung I sped past the day-trippers bartering in the waterfront shops and the monks gathering morning alms in the busy streets. Instead, I went straight to the harbour to join a small group boarding a boat to Burma's forgotten islands.

A collection of 800 mostly uninhabited isles, the Myeik Archipelago pokes out from the Andaman Sea like a mismatched collection of volcanic pyramids. Most are coated in twisted mangroves and strangler figs, and edged by strips of sand so golden they could rival the country's gilded Buddhist temples for sparkle. Their interiors conceal a potential treasure trove of wildlife: monkeys, Burmese pythons, big cats, wild elephants – no one really knows for sure, the isles are that uncharted. But that could all be about to change.

With the past few years seeing Burma reopening for tourism, and the recent relaxation of government rules restricting travellers' movements, these islands are starting to beckon the curious. The archipelago was formerly off limits as some of the islands are used as military bases; however, permits have now been granted to a select few boats, allowing them to navigate here. With the one resort reporting booming business in its 22 rooms, and with a second resort currently under construction, it may only be a matter of time before these waters aren't quite as empty as they are now.

With that thought in my head, I slid off the inflatable dinghy and felt the warm water envelop me. Securing my snorkel, I kicked ►

◀ down for a proper look. As the bubbles cleared I made out the heads of sepia-coloured brain coral just below my flippers, while jellyfish bobbed through the water. A bright-orange sea anemone waved as two clownfish finned among its tentacles. Angelfish swam right up to my mask, unperturbed by my presence. A fisherman's net swayed in the darkness ahead, and suddenly I was surrounded by a swarm of white fish. However, as the water became deeper, the coral began to appear bleached and somehow irregular.

"Dynamite," explained Mike, our skipper, when we reached the beach. Although he now sails tourists around in catamarans, previously he worked for 20 years as a commercial fisherman all over the world. What's happened here over the 50 years that the country's been largely closed off to tourism is something of a mystery but hints lie hidden beneath the waves.

The people of the sea

That night, as we gathered driftwood for a fire, our ship's mandatory government-approved guide Hein (who, he told us, is one of only seven qualified to lead this trip) began speaking of 'sea gypsies'. These islands, he explained, aren't completely uninhabited. The Moken have called the Myeik Archipelago home for as long as anyone can

remember. Said to number around 2,000, they traditionally spend their whole lives at sea, many being born on giant 'mother ships' that serve not only as fishing vessels but also as kitchens, dining rooms and bedrooms. These large boats tow fleets of smaller vessels – we saw one towing 13 – which they use to go hunting. They survive on the bounty of seafood beneath their floating homes and forage for edible roots and fruits on land. "Some can hold their breath for 15 minutes," said Hein, "and the children can see really well underwater meaning they are excellent at spearing fish."

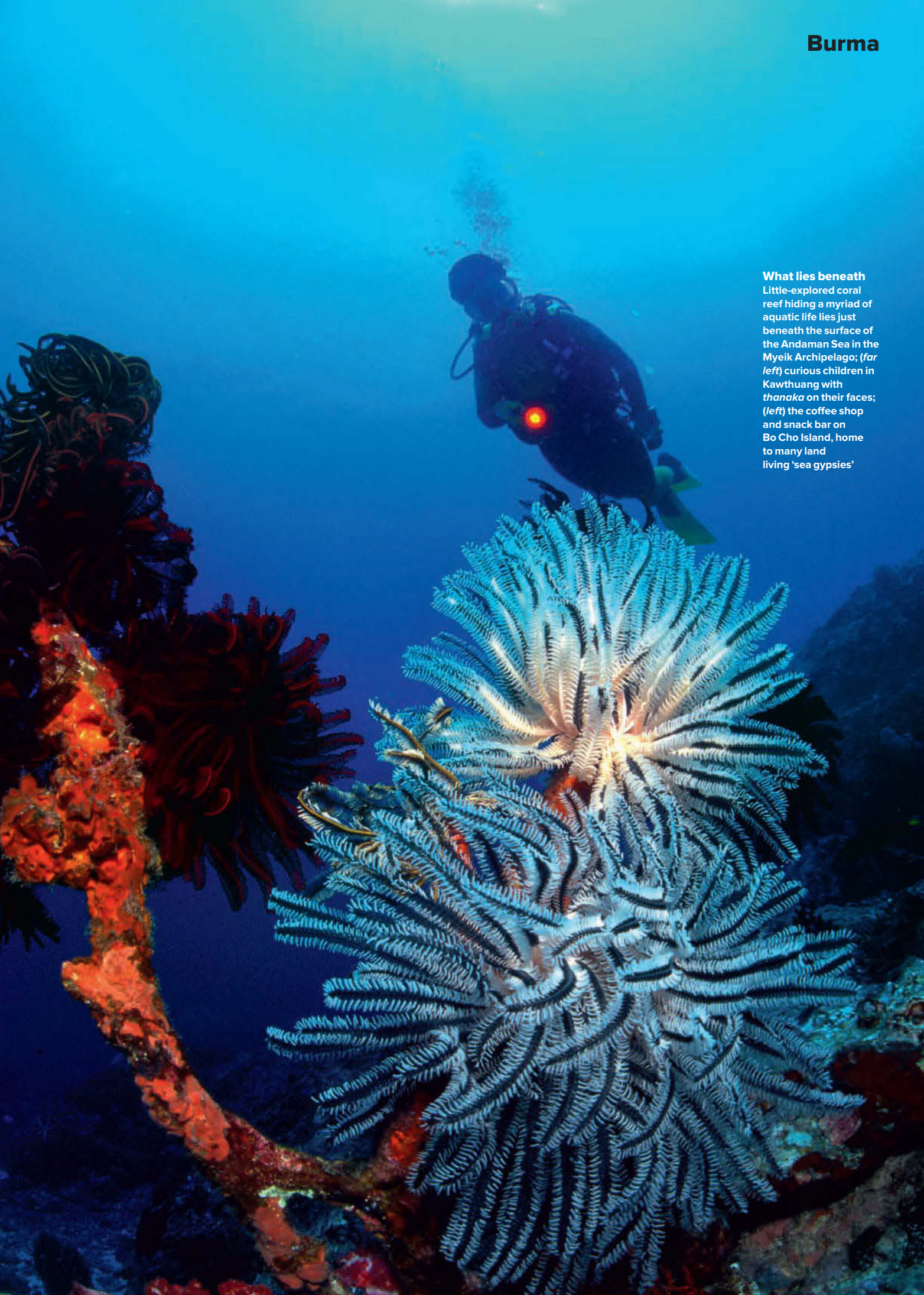
In the past the Moken would only come ashore during the monsoons, establishing temporary shelters on these islands and then leaving them once the storms passed. That all changed in 2004. In an effort to try to assimilate the Moken into Burmese society, the government tried to move them onto land. Though many resisted, now 60% of the 850-strong population of Bo Cho Island are settled Moken; the rest are fishermen from the mainland.

We anchored at Bo Cho the following day. Children gathered on the beach to welcome us, their faces covered in *thanaka* – a paste made from tree pulp, worn as sun protection and to moisturise the skin. They smiled at us, curious, but once the initial novelty wore off, they busied themselves with more pressing matters: the boys ▶

'As the bubbles cleared I made out the heads of sepia-coloured brain coral just below my flippers, while jellyfish bobbed through the water'



What lies beneath
Little-explored coral reef hiding a myriad of aquatic life lies just beneath the surface of the Andaman Sea in the Myeik Archipelago; (*far left*) curious children in Kawthuang with *thanaka* on their faces; (*left*) the coffee shop and snack bar on Bo Cho Island, home to many land living 'sea gypsies'





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◀ running, falling, jumping and throwing hairy caterpillars at the girls; the girls screaming and hiding. It was a scene no different from any school playground in the world – except for the bedraggled dogs, cats and cockerels that moved among them.

Surprisingly the village boasted a coffee shop and several stores, plus a line of stilted houses that served as Main Street. Underneath one, a Moken family sat playing cards in the sand, and called me over to watch. They picked and dropped cards with speed, smoking cigars intently; I couldn't work out what game they were playing but their serious expressions indicated that the stakes were high.

"The village is named after Ma Kyone Galet – a 'gypsy' woman who settled on the island some 75 years ago," explained Hein as we walked up to the temple. "You'll see it's mainly Moken women here during the day, the men will be out fishing. Things have changed already. If you'd come even seven years ago the Moken would have been wearing sarongs and nothing else."

Children were climbing all over the Buddhist stupa as Hein explained that monks came from the mainland to build it – Moken people aren't Buddhists. As the bell rang we followed the children to the school where 140 pupils spanning eight grades were being taught Burmese (Moken speak their own language, which is said to sound similar to Malay), maths and English. "You sound funny," squealed one little girl as I asked her how old she was. Any speaking sent them into fits of giggles.

According to Hein, many of the Moken have been receptive to sending their children to school, which is funded by the government. But they do face problems. In 1997 the government put a protection order on the islands' trees to stop illegal logging. This prevented the Moken from replacing their mother ships – which are dug out from single large trees – so there is real concern that their way of life could be lost. For now though, back on the beach with the next generation of 'sea gypsies', there were only smiles and laughter.

Island high

We moved on and dropped anchor at an island known as Lampi, a large crescent-shaped patch of land north of Bo Cho and officially designated a nature reserve. We took kayaks over to the huge stretch of white sand that fringed the mangroves. Hundreds of translucent crabs scattered at our feet as the smooth grains audibly crunched beneath. A plethora of tracks crossed the sand, belonging to lizards, birds and the monkeys that now screeched from the branches above.

The tide was too low to navigate one of the many rivers that weave into the interior. I tried walking alongside it for a few metres before the vegetation became too thick to pass – it seemed a machete was a walking necessity here. It was worth a try though: seven wild elephants are said to live on these shores, shipped over when logging was outlawed; there's also supposed to be wild boar and musk deer too. But right now, as the sun seeped blood red hues into the sky, we had the beach to ourselves.

From this sublime empty beach, we headed for the one resort in the whole island chain. Khayinkwa Island (aka Macleod) is home to the Myanmar Andaman Resort – not that you'd know it at first, so well secluded are the beach huts amid the trees. While some of the group decided to rest and enjoy the hot showers, four of us headed up through the forest to the highest point on the island. Cicadas buzzed like a fire alarm in the trees. The track became steeper and the ropes laid down by the resort became necessary as near-vertical rocks broke the trail.

To either side, the leaves twitched with insects, lizards and birds. I dripped with sweat as the humidity rose under the canopy. After 45 minutes, the trees ended and we could peer down on the bay, where the boats looked like plastic toys. ►



Beautiful Bo Cho
(Top to bottom) The Buddhist temple on Bo Cho Island; a curious Moken child peers out from her stilted house; most houses on the main street on Bo Cho Island belong to the fishermen, while 'sea gypsies' tend to live behind





Anchors away...
 From the gilded temples of Kawthuang (*bottom middle*) to the bright, natural lights of sunset above Lampi (*below*); a trip to the Myeik Archipelago promises meetings with the Moken 'sea gypsies' (*right and above*), crabs and summitting mini mountains (*top right*)





WHAT'S IN A NAME?

As with most places in Burma (aka Myanmar), the Myeik Archipelago and most of its islands tend to have two names – a colonial one and a Burmese one. For example you may see the archipelago referred to as Mergui in some guidebooks and websites but mention it to anyone in the country and they won't have a clue what you're talking about. A lot of the islands have Scottish names, but again GPS charts, fishermen and Moken will refer to them by their indigenous names.





Myeik magic

The best way to explore Lampi Island is by kayak – home to mangrove swamps, wild elephants, Burmese pythons, monkeys and more...



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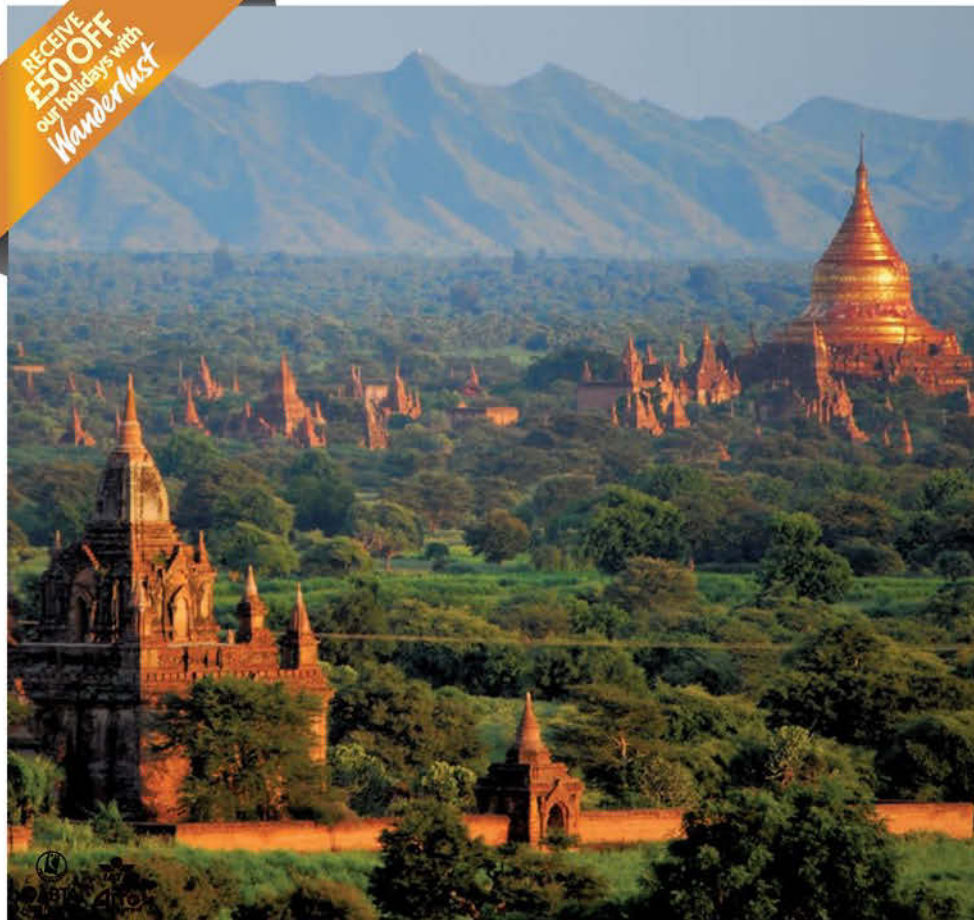
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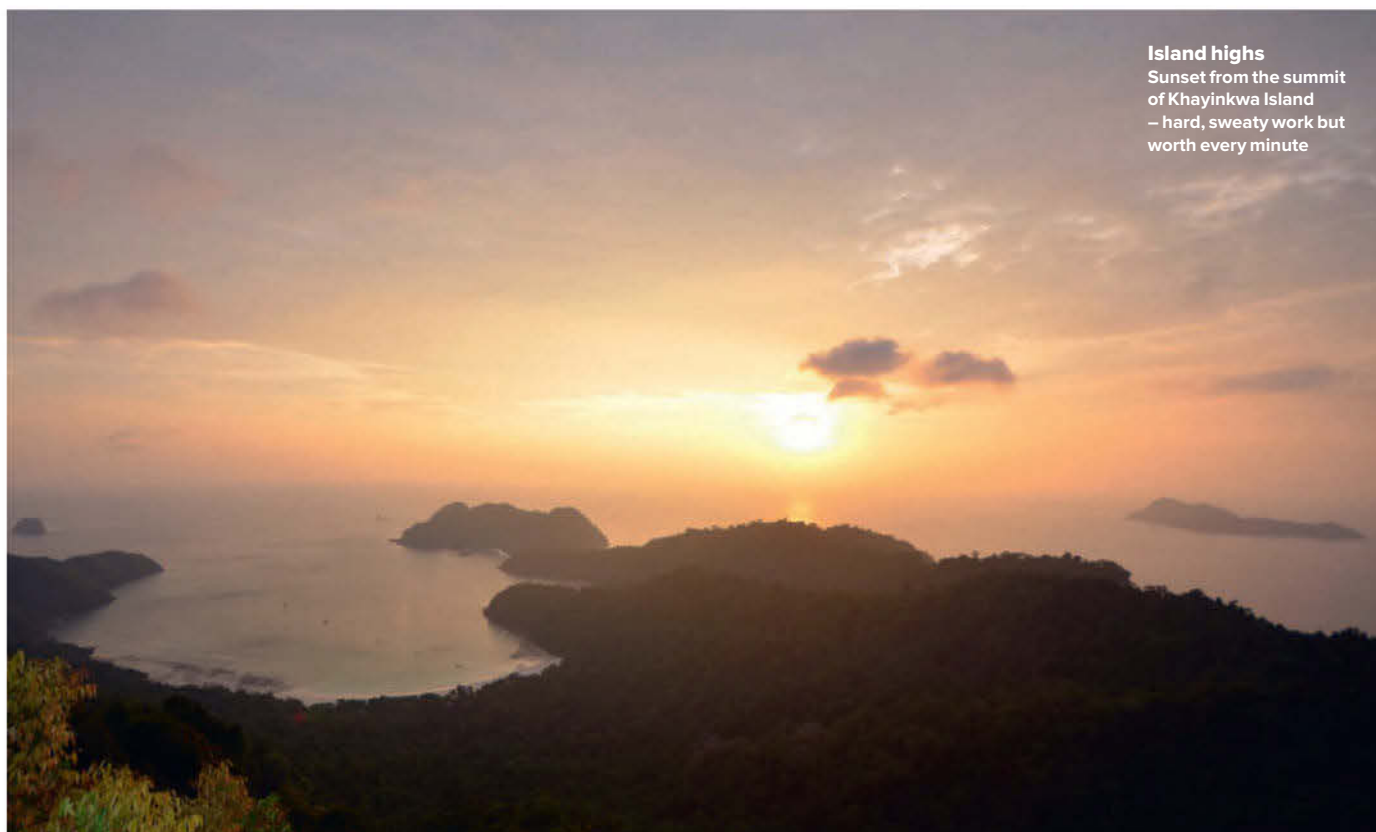
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Island highs
Sunset from the summit
of Khayinkwa Island
– hard, sweaty work but
worth every minute

‘As the darkness seemed inevitable, something magical happened: thousands of tiny green lights – fireflies – twinkled all around, guiding us back to the beach’

◀ Hein asked if we wanted to try for the summit and without hesitation I followed. The path up was even less trodden. Cobwebs hung around branches like wisps of angel's hair on Christmas trees; soon we were spotting spiders that even Hein couldn't identify as poisonous or not. We reached the top as the sky was turning crimson, just in time to watch the sun set. The auburn flash of sea eagles was replaced by the darting swoops of bats; it was time to descend.

We raced down, trying to make the most of the remaining streaks of daylight, but under the canopy it darkened quickly. The cicadas' chirps began to break up, as though they were running out of batteries, before stopping completely. All at once, the forest fell silent. Then, as the darkness seemed inevitable, something magical happened: thousands of tiny green lights – fireflies – twinkled all around, guiding us back to the beach.

As we jumped into the dinghy and sped to the boat, I noticed that our wake was now also filled with tiny green dots – phosphorescence, the luminescent living organisms of the sea. That night we sipped Myanmar beer on deck and cooked fresh crab on the barbecue while schools of marlin leapt out of the water.

Paradise found

We passed the following day snorkelling among starfish and stingrays at the romantically named Island 115.

Clambering back into the dinghy I watched as two small Moken boats rowed passed us, their occupants paying us no mind at all. I looked over at the island opposite – where the archipelago's second resort is currently under construction – and wondered how long the Moken would keep coming here once the place was filled with more tourists.

That night a couple of us kayaked over to another island, the name of which no one seemed to know. As we searched the trees for signs of wildlife a single Moken man wandered past. We called to him and, with no common language, attempted conversation using hand gestures – from which we established he'd walked around the entire island and was about to return to his camp nearby. Via sand drawings we also garnered that he'd seen two snakes. He offered us one of his cigars, invited us to join him and then sped off at such a pace he seemed to merge into the island itself.

We gave up our trail and lingered on the sand.

Looking out to sea, as the last of the sun's rays began to seep away, we watched the tiny lights on the squid-fishing boats begin to flick on, illuminating the water – and shining a light onto this once 'lost' area.

Development is inevitable – somewhere this special can't escape it for too long. But for now, we stood in the shadows of the mangroves, castaways in a secret paradise, hidden from the world. 📷





Burma Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Naypyidaw
Population: 55 million
Language: Burmese, plus tribal languages and dialects. Some English spoken in tourist areas.
Time: GMT+6.5
International dialling code: +95
Visas: Required by UK nationals. Apply in advance at the Myanmar Embassy (www.myanmarembassy-london.com); visas cost £14.
Money: Kyat (MMK), currently around MMK1,600 to the UK£. US dollars are widely accepted and often preferred. In small towns you need kyat (pronounced chat). ATMs available in larger towns; few places take credit cards.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Dry season;** temperatures and rainfall lowest. Prime tourist season
 ■ **Very hot.** Moken hold their annual gathering in Myeik Archipelago in April
 ■ **Monsoon season** – best avoided

Health & safety

Consult your GP about vaccinations and malaria prophylaxis. **Avoid mosquito bites**, especially during the day: dengue fever is a problem. Don't drink untreated tap water.

Further reading & information

Myanmar (Insight Guides, 2013)
Myanmar (Lonely Planet, 2011)

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/143 for links to more content:

ARCHIVE ARTICLES

- ◆ Discover the real Burma – issue 134
- ◆ A golden future for Burma? – issue 124
- ◆ Discovering wildlife in Wild Burma – online

PLANNING GUIDES

- ◆ Burma/Myanmar Travel Guide

THE TRIP

The author travelled with **Intrepid Travel** (intrepidtravel.com, 0845 287 1190) on its nine-day *Burma Sailing ex Yangon* trip. Currently (due to a travel advisory for Australians) the trip is running departures from Phuket (Thailand) rather than Yangon (Burma), though this may change – check website for up-to-date details. Prices for the Thailand departure start at £1,045pp, including return transport from Phuket to the islands, twin-share cabin on a skippered yacht and most meals. International flights are not included but Intrepid can arrange.

Getting there & around

There are no direct UK-Burma flights. **Malaysia Airlines** (www.malaysiaairlines.com) flies daily from London to Yangon via Kuala Lumpur. Flight time is around 15 hours plus stopover; returns cost around £800. Other options go via Bangkok.

Domestic airlines connect Burma's main tourist towns, including Kawthaung – launch-pad for exploring the Myeik Archipelago. Visiting the islands by boat requires a permit so you must travel on an organised tour or guided daytrip, or stay at the resort (see below).

Accommodation

The author stayed at the **Asia Plaza Hotel** in Yangon (www.asiaplazahotel.com) and the **Garden Hotel** in Kawthaung (gardenhotellmm.com). There are about 800 islands in the Myeik Archipelago and currently only one resort, the **Myanmar Andaman Resort** (three-night packages from US\$1,220 per room; www.myanmarandamanresort.com). The resort offers pick-ups from Kawthaung or Ranong in Thailand.

Snorkelling & diving

The sea around the Myeik Archipelago has strong currents – **diving and snorkelling should be done only with a trained guide** who can show you the safe spots. Coral reefs are plentiful and devoid of tourists, offering an experience that few – other than Moken and fishermen – will have had.

Jellyfish are present and getting **snorkeller's itch** (from the larvae) is usual. It doesn't hurt, but rinse off after swimming, and take medicated talc and anti-itch cream. The only dive centre in Burma is the Myanmar Andaman Resort.

MYEIK ARCHIPELAGO HIGHLIGHTS

1 Moken Village, Bo Cho Island

Get an insight into the life of the so-called 'sea gypsies' at their land base, and meet the excited school children while tourists are still a novelty.

2 Khayinkwa Island

Make the humid climb through the trees to

reach the highest point on the island – a perfect place to watch the sun set over the archipelago.

3 Pyi Taw Aye Paya Temple, Kawthaung

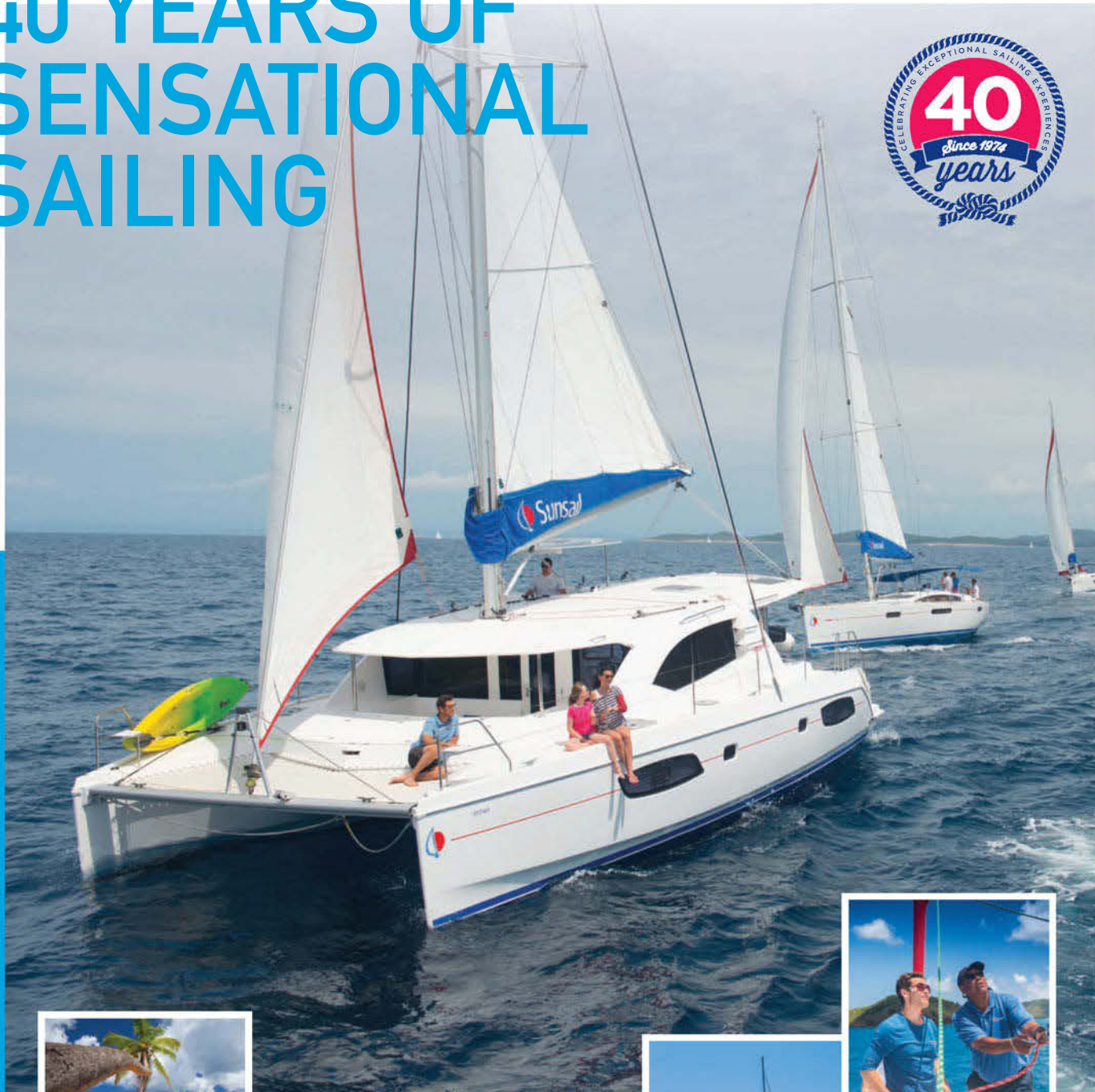
Not as well known as Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon perhaps, but this smaller version still packs a golden punch and offers great views over the whole town and coastline.

4 Lampi Island

Whether or not you see the island's elusive wild elephants, the mangroves, monkeys and azure waters of this official nature reserve will keep you more than occupied.



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At sunrise, a flotilla of balloons takes flight over Cappadocia



READER ASSIGNMENT: **CAPPADOCIA**

Cappadocia is like a Turkish fairytale – a magical land quite unlike any other. The perfect place, then, to put five budding travel writers and photographers to the test...

WORDS & PICTURES: **WANDERLUST JOURNEYS TEAM**





“So how long have you been a balloon pilot?” I asked Serhan as we started to lift off the volcanic rock. “Two weeks,” he deadpanned.

As I started to climb out of the basket, his warm smile and laughing eyes let me in on the joke: “Actually, 11 years.”

We rose smoothly between the fairy chimneys of Cappadocia, sunbeams stroking the plump cluster of balloons below. Around us awoke an otherworldly landscape, moulded by nature as creatively as a potter moulds his clay.

As one of the longest continually inhabited regions in the world, the Central Anatolian region of Cappadocia is timeless: a place of dusty hushed valleys, imposing

rock castles, mysterious underground cities and ancient cave dwellings – some still inhabited. The unique terrain is the work of the surrounding volcanoes, which erupted around 30 million years ago and cloaked the Anatolian plateau in ash and lava. This pyroclastic spew subsequently compressed into a mix soft tuff and tough basalt, which eons of erosion have worked into a weird wonderland.

Drawn by its fertile soil, the Hittites, Lydians and Phrygians all laid claim to Cappadocia. Alexander the Great ousted the Persians; later it was swallowed up by the Roman Empire. I was far from the first to appreciate its beauty.

Our balloon came back down to earth gently, landing between patches of vines and lofty rock formations. I watched as a scarved and skirted woman with a curved

knife gathered ripe bunches nearby. Every autumn, the freshly harvested grapes are stomped to remove the skin and extract the deep purple sweetness that will be made into *pekmez*, a household staple that tastes like golden syrup and flavours many local dishes.

The Cappadocian hub town of Göreme is like those grapes. Under its shiny, touristy skin is a real Anatolian village, a generous and unpretentious community whose members are inextricably linked to each other and their surroundings. In the past ten years, Göreme has developed from its traditional roots into a holiday hotspot thanks to its natural wonders, ancient art, activities, unique food and historical treasures. But even sweeter is the essence of the place – that juice found beneath the surface.



Rocking out
Carved into the rocks,
the Byzantine-era Keslik
monastery is loaded
with atmosphere



The Cappadocia Assignment

In September 2013, five readers joined *Wanderlust's* founder and editor-in-chief Lyn Hughes and photographer Paul Harris on a Wanderlust Journey to research and photograph Cappadocia. The team – Nicola Brown, Kav Dadfar, Maria Hart, Lori Anne Heckbert and Sorcha Holloway – compiled everything in this feature (plus extras online). Thanks go to Paul Harris, Redmint Communications, Eren Serpen and Pat Yale.

Read more of our Cappadocia discoveries online at www.wanderlust.co.uk/143

Top five... EXPERIENCES

- 1 Get high!** To really appreciate Cappadocia's surreal landscapes, look down on them – either from a hot air balloon or a natural viewpoint.
- 2 Sleep in a cave.** In Cappadocia most hotels are built into the rock (as are many locals' houses), offering an unusual way to snooze.
- 3 Watch the sun go down,** glass of local wine in hand, from one of the many hotel or restaurant terraces.
- 4 Bring out your inner Indiana Jones.** Leave the car behind and explore the extraordinary landscapes and archaeological sites on foot, by bike or on horseback.
- 5 Descend into an underground city.** Marvel at how locals – with their livestock – would hide in them over the centuries. ►

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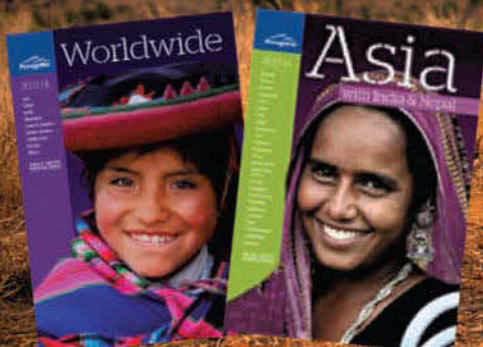


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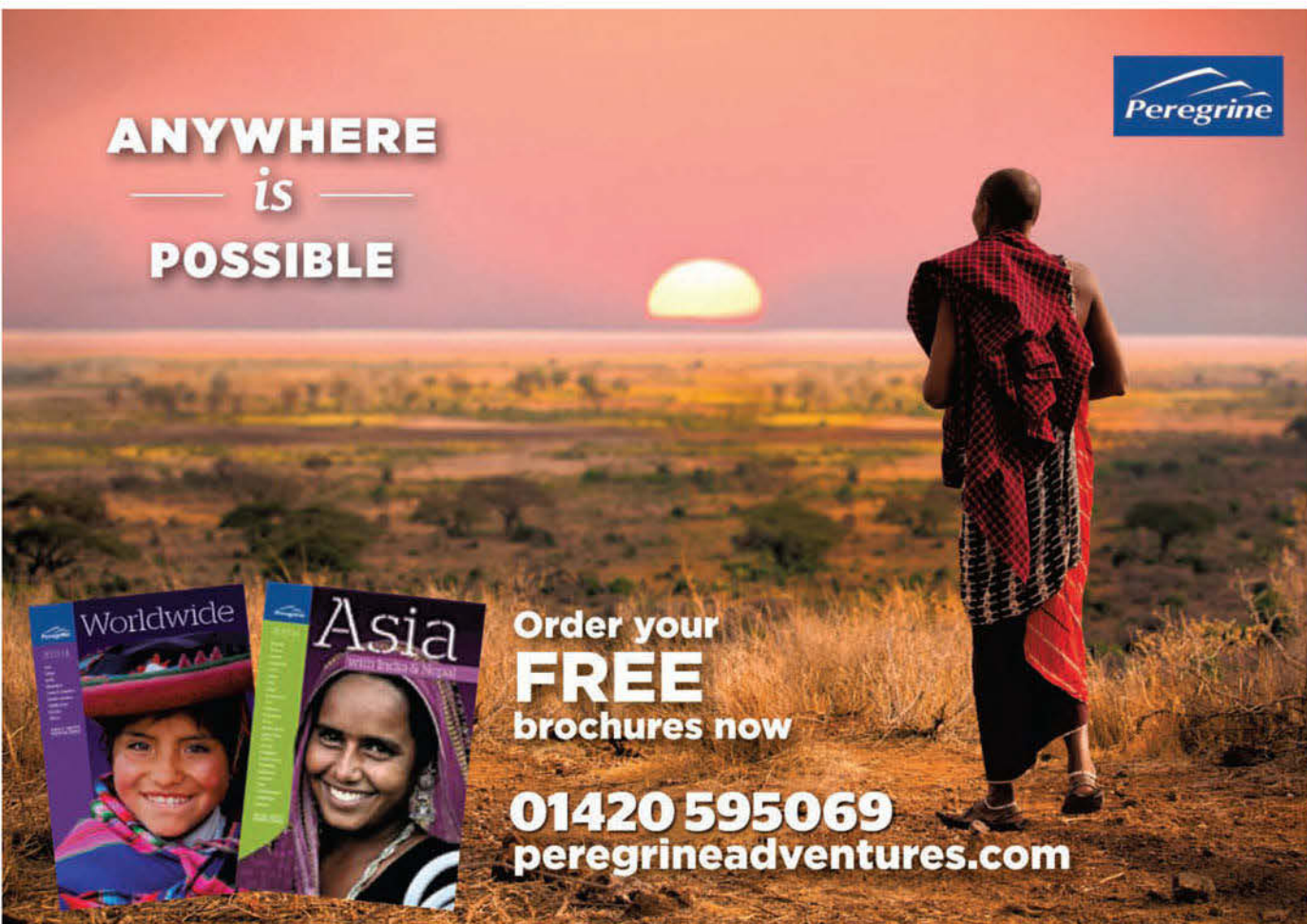


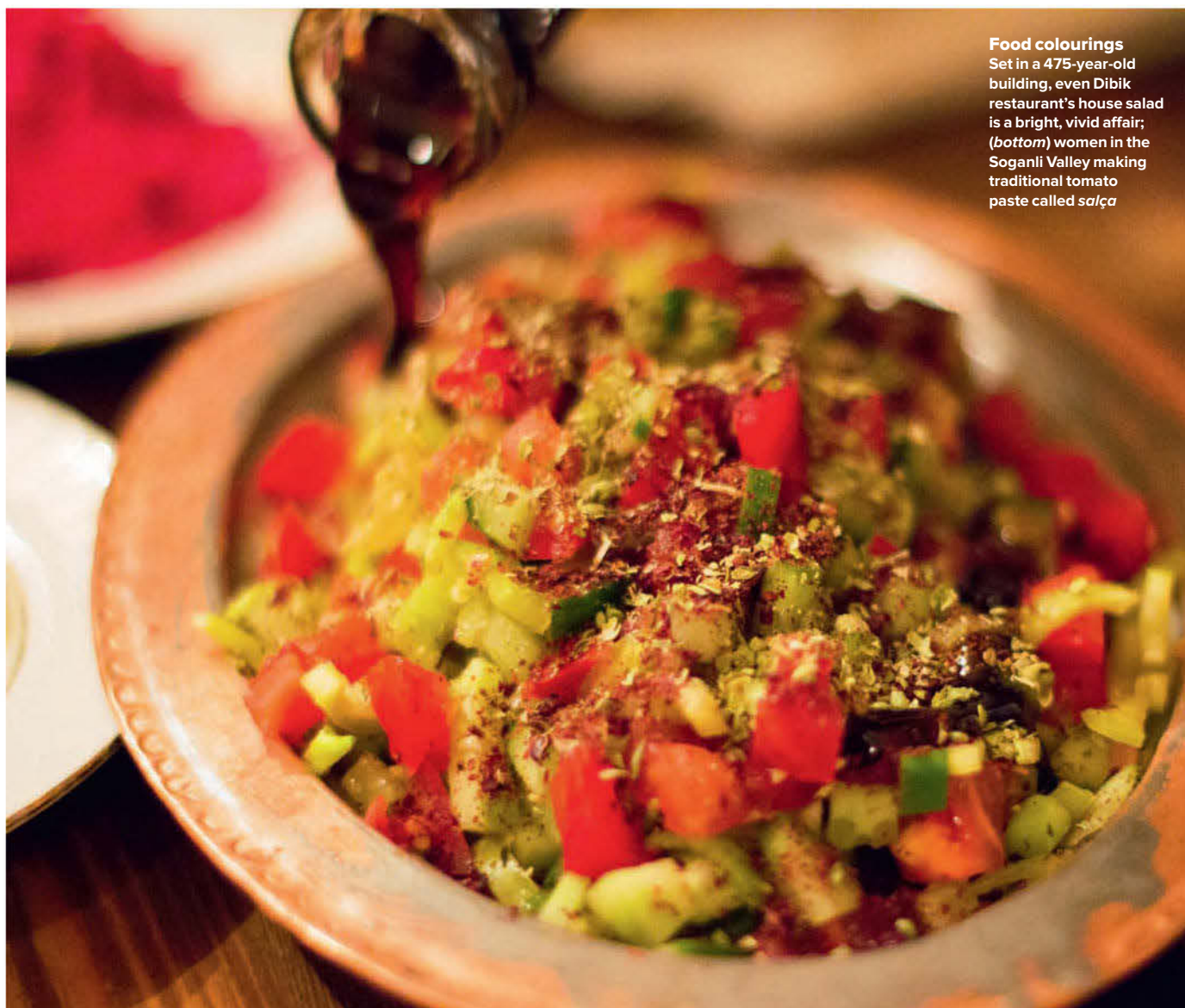
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Food colourings
Set in a 475-year-old building, even Dibik restaurant's house salad is a bright, vivid affair; (bottom) women in the Soganli Valley making traditional tomato paste called *salça*



Meet the Locals

EREN SERPEN

Proprietor, Serinn House

"Cappadocia is the Tuscany of Turkey! It is natural and not overdeveloped like the seaside. Horse-riding or walking is the best way to experience the Christian heritage, the valleys and the unpretentiousness of the villagers."

◀ Top five... FOOD & DRINK

- 1 Testi** This local one-pot stew (chicken, beef or veggie options usually available) is baked in a traditional one-time-use clay pot, which is covered in bread dough, and hammered open at the table. Yum!
- 2 Pekmez** Grape juice is boiled over an open flame until it reduces into this delicious molasses-like syrup. It's a breakfast favourite.
- 3 Gözleme** The perfect cheap lunch, *gözleme* is a Turkish flatbread – almost a cross between a pitta and a crêpe – filled with fresh ingredients and cooked on a griddle.
- 4 Wine** Cappadocia is Turkey's key wine-producing area. Many domestic grape varieties, such as emir and öküzgözü (ox-eye), are grown here as well as better known grapes (cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay). The two main wineries are Turasan in Ürgüp (which has a fine visitors' centre) and Kocabağ in Uçhisar. Local house wine can be inexpensive, but consider spending a little more for a fine Turasan sauvignon blanc or full-bodied Turasan syrah.
- 5 Salça** In autumn, you'll spot women with huge wooden paddles stirring giant bubbling cauldrons of *salça* (tomato paste). The paste is typically made from tomatoes, onion and red pepper, and is used in many dishes. ▶

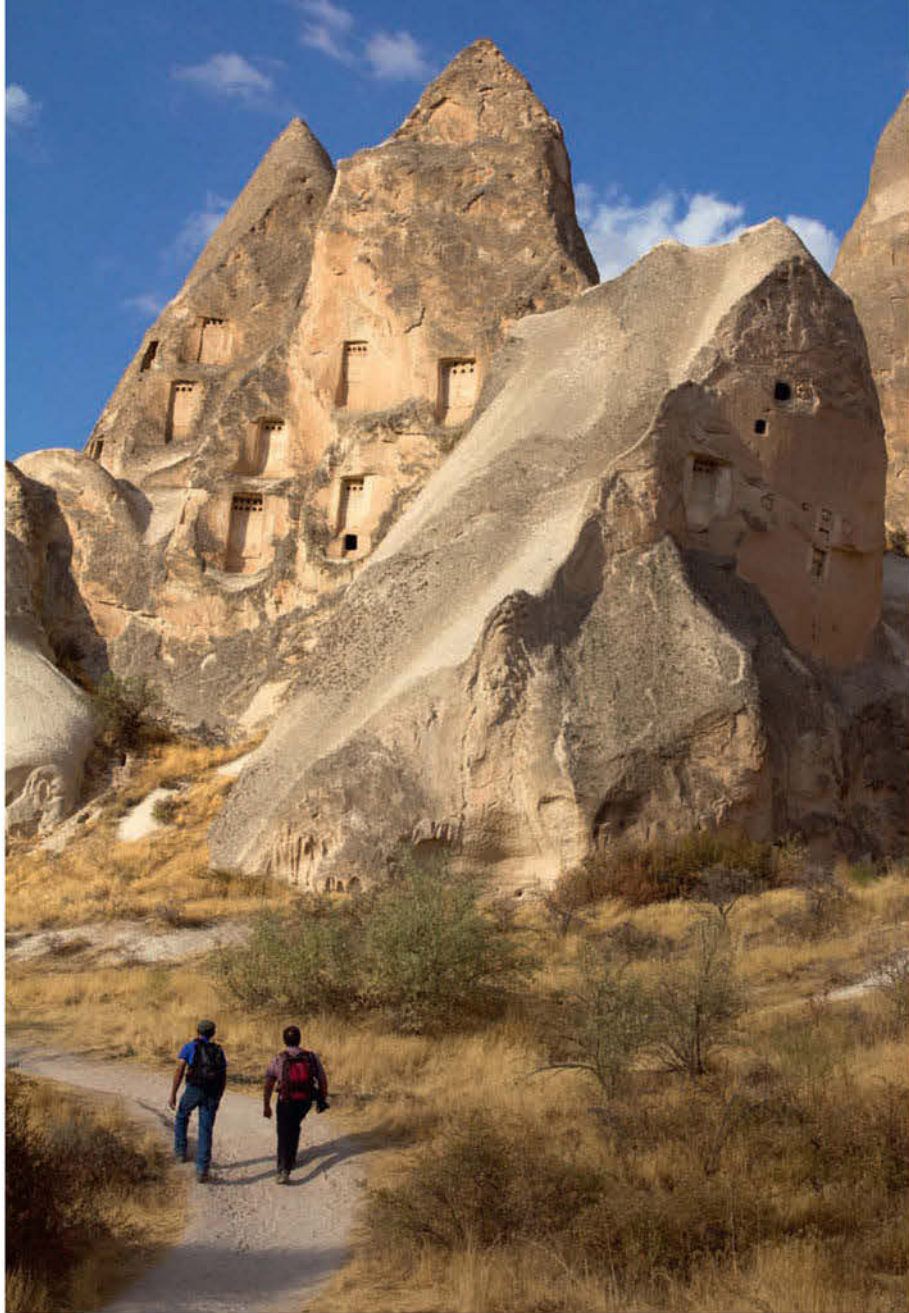




www.butterflyballoons.co

Turkish highs

Buzzing with colours, scents and sights, Cappadocia is a sensuous, sensory delight, taking you from markets – where you inhale fruits and spices – to ceramic workshops to the dizzying desert heights in a balloon



◀ Top five... WALKS

1 Güllüdere (Rose) Valley Head out in the afternoon to walk among enchanting fairy chimneys (*pictured left*), rock churches and neat vineyards. Be sure to find a good lookout for panoramic sunset views of the valley.

2 Devrent Valley Although just a short drive from Göreme, it's almost as if Devrent was plucked from a far planet and dropped into Cappadocia – its lunar landscape is unlike any other in the area. The animal-shaped rock formations will keep you entertained as you walk.

3 Soğanlı Valley Avoid the crowds by taking a leisurely walk through the epic Soğanlı Valley. Explore its ancient dwellings and rock-cut churches, which are adorned with paintings of the life of Christ. Before you leave, stop by the main square in the village of Soglani to haggle with the local woman selling traditional Soğanlı dolls.

4 Güvercinlik (Pigeon) Valley Pigeons have been an important part of Cappadocian life for centuries – farmers have long used the birds' droppings as a rich fertiliser. Situated between Göreme and Uçhisar, Pigeon Valley provides easy walking among manmade caves, churches and old pigeon houses.

5 Görkündere (Love) Valley If you arrive here early enough you'll have a magical view of the hot-air balloon morning lift-off. Afterwards, admire the valley's unique rock formations and let the stream guide you between fruit trees and vineyards to the town of Avanos.

Top five... PLACES TO EAT

1 Dibek This traditional restaurant in the heart of Göreme is set in a 475-year-old family home, restored in 2004. Owner Mehmet delights in showing off his ancient wine cellar, deep in the caves, and will advise on wines to accompany the flavoursome food. Specialities include *manti* (Turkish ravioli) and *testi kebabı* (pottery kebab), eaten at low tables while sitting on the floor (dibektraditionalcook.com).

2 Nazar Börek Who lives in a fairy chimney, plays the *saz* and makes the best gözleme in Göreme? Why, it's 'Professor Gözleme', aka Refik Çiftçi of the Nazar Börek Café! This casual lunchtime spot also serves Turkish pastries.

3 Café Şafak When you just need a good coffee, head here. Claiming the best black stuff this side of Oz, this cosy café in Göreme also serves Fatma's award-winning soup and other light bites (cafesafak.weebly.com).

4 Ziggy Cafe Stylish but cosy dining room in Ürgüp – outdoor terraces, a cool soundtrack and perhaps the best meze in the region make this a firm favourite; reservations recommended (ziggycafe.com).

5 Seten Great views over Göreme, a warm atmosphere and attentive service, plus well executed Anatolian dishes, make this a good top-end choice (setenrestaurant.com).



Hot eats
Traditional
ice cream in
a Turkish dinery



Top five... ACTIVITIES

1 Horse riding The name 'Cappadocia' is thought to derive from an old Persian word meaning 'land of beautiful horses', and clip-clopping among the vineyards and fairy chimneys is certainly the most peaceful way to experience the valleys. Several companies offer horse-riding packages, from one-hour tasters to multi-day trips (from €23 for one hour; www.kadost.com).

2 Hot-air ballooning Myriad multicoloured balloons rise from the valleys around Göreme at sunrise each day, offering a unique perspective on the fairy chimneys and, if it's clear, Mt Erciyes in the distance (from €165; www.kapadokyaballoon.com).

3 Day tours Many local companies offer similar colour-coded day tours. The Green tour is an easy and efficient option for seeing distant sites such as underground cities; the Red tour includes Göreme Open Air Museum.

4 Hiking Cappadocia offers some of the best walks in Turkey, for hikers of all levels of fitness. Options include the magical Rose Valley, dramatic Soğanlı Valley and the lunar-like Devrent Valley. A guide is advisable; try walkingmehmet.net or middleearthtravel.com.

5 Mountain biking A network of narrow trails twists through and over the valleys, outcrops and rock formations, making this the perfect spot for an exploration by bike, whatever your level of experience. For more info, see bikinginturkey.com. ►



Meet the Locals

MEHMET GUNGOR

Walking guide (walkingmehmet.net)

"I have been exploring the Rose Valley since I was a child and it is my favourite place to walk. If you only have time for one place to walk, make it this one."



Low hanging fruit
Gathering in the
grape harvest in the
Kings Valley



◀ Top five... **THINGS I WISH I'D KNOWN**

1 Save your ticket from Göreme Open Air Museum to get free entry into the **Tokalı Kilise** (Church of the Buckle), just down the road. The largest church in Göreme, Kilise has been undergoing restoration by a team from Italy, who refer to it as the 'Cappadocian Sistine Chapel'.

2 Real testi (stew cooked in clay pots) requires **pre-booking** as it takes hours to make. It may be served with a hammer to break the pot open.

3 When you get on a **bus**, don't pay the driver – either a conductor will come and collect your money or you pay the driver when you get off.

4 If flying from overseas into Kayseri via Istanbul, go to the **International Arrivals** area for your baggage at Kayseri. Although you've just got off a domestic flight, your luggage may have been checked straight through from your home country.

5 If you hire a car, note that **petrol stations** are thin on the ground. There are none in Göreme – the nearest is 3km away.



Meet the Locals

SELAMI BARUT

Sato Cave Hotel

"See the views and sunset from Sunset Point. It is also a perfect spot for watching the balloons launch at sunrise."

Top five... **CULTURAL INSIGHTS**

1 Learn to cook A cooking class or demonstration in a family home is not just about learning to make great Turkish food, it offers a very personal window into local culture. Ask in Café Şafak about Fatma's delicious cooking courses (cafesafak@gmail.com; from TL60 [£18] pp).

2 Listen to the saz Hear the twang of this long-neck stringed instrument at Nazar Börek or Göreme Restaurant (both on Göreme's main street). The saz has a rich, evocative sound, especially when accompanied by traditional singing, hand drums and spoons.

3 Appreciate art The vivid frescos of Cappadocia's medieval Christian sanctuaries make it one of the leading areas for post-iconoclastic Byzantine art.

4 Shop for ceramics In ancient times, Hittites used wine vessels in rituals to serve gods and goddesses. Today, these clay pots are still made in the same way in Avanos. Head to 300-year-old Firça Seramik (fircaseramik.com), where master potters demonstrate the art of shaping bowls and jugs, and painting them with centuries-old designs.

5 Help with the harvest Take a harvest tour with Ali Yavuz, proprietor of the Kelebek Hotel (€60; kelebekhotel.com). Help fill baskets with produce (grapes in autumn, tomatoes and apricots in spring), picnic out in the fields and learn about local farming. Proceeds help preserve agricultural traditions for future generations.



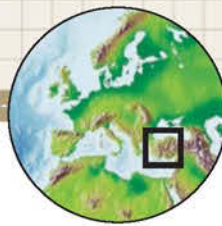
Top five... SLEEPS

- 1 Hezen Cave Hotel, Ortahisar** Elegant rooms, thoughtful service, great views and a do-anything-for-you attitude (doubles from around €130; hezenhotel.com).
- 2 Argos in Cappadocia, Uçhisar** Gorgeous top-end hotel with views over Pigeon Valley (doubles from €140; argosincappadocia.com).
- 3 Kelebek Hotel, Göreme** With a mix of arched rooms, cave rooms and rooms in fairy chimneys, this former family home has something to suit everyone (doubles from €70; kelebekhotel.com).
- 4 Serinn House, Ürgüp** Charming small cave hotel with contemporary rooms and an owner who always goes the extra mile (doubles from around €110 serinnhouse.com).
- 5 Shoestring Cave Hotel, Göreme** Rooms at this traditional cave house are arranged around a courtyard and range from dormitory to deluxe. The icing on the cake is the large pool on the top terrace, which has amazing views (from €10; shoestringcave.com). 



Digging the scene
As with much of Cappadocia, Göreme has a wealth of cave accommodation – including the Göreme Inn and Shoestring Cave Hotel

Cappadocia Footnotes



VITAL STATISTICS

Capital of Turkey: Ankara
Population: 80.6 million
Languages: Turkish
Time: GMT+2 (GMT+3 Mar-Oct)
International dialling code: +90
Visas: Required by UK nationals. Buy online (evisa.gov.tr/en/). Visas on arrival (£10 cash) are due to be phased out.
Money: Turkish lira (TL), currently around TL3.3 to the UK£. ATMs are available in most areas. Tip guides and restaurant staff. Be prepared to haggle.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

When to go

■ **Cool, pleasant temperatures** – best for hiking. Spring brings wildflowers; autumn is harvest season
 ■ **High summer** – very hot; temperatures can top 40°C
 ■ **Winter** – icy cold, snow. Good for skiing in nearby Anatolian mountains

Health & safety

Be up to date on standard vaccinations. Drink purified water. Pack high-factor sunscreen. Take out comprehensive travel insurance

THE TRIP

i The group travelled on **Wanderlust Journeys' Cappadocia On Assignment** trip (01992 579697, wanderlustjourneys.co.uk). These creative breaks include writing and photography tuition, and advice on how to create an article for a travel magazine. Check the website for details of future trips and workshops.

✈ Getting there
 There are no direct flights from the UK to Cappadocia. Both **Pegasus Airlines** (0845 0848 980, flypgs.com) and **Turkish Airlines** (0844 800 6666, turkishairlines.com) fly from London to Istanbul (4hrs; price varies wildly) and from Istanbul to Kayseri (1hr; returns from around £40).

Overnight **buses** link Istanbul and Cappadocia (around 11-12hrs).

Getting your bearings

Göreme is the main tourist village; it has a large number of facilities and hotels – and new ones are opening all the time. The **Open Air Museum** is on the edge of town. **Ürgüp**, **Ortahisar**, **Uçhisar** are less touristy and have an increasing range of options. **Kayseri airport** is around 75km to the

east; **Pre-book a shuttle** to your hotel; the only alternative is expensive taxis.

The actual region is larger than most people appreciate, and there is plenty to see and do; allow an absolute minimum of three days.

Getting around

✈ In Cappadocia, buses are the cheapest way to get around. There are regular services from Göreme, the main hub, to places such as Uçhisar, Avanos and Kaymaklı; fares are TL2-4 (60p-£1.20). Pay a conductor on the bus.

Taxis are available. Göreme to Avanos costs around TL35 (£11), Göreme to Ürgüp around TL25 (£8).

Cars offer convenience, and can be rented from hotels or the tourist office. Expect to pay around £30 a day.

Cost of travel

£ Cappadocia offers good value. A meal in a local restaurant costs around £15; a night in a mid-range hotel £60. Site fees are reasonable: for example, entrance to Göreme Open Air Museum and Kaymaklı Underground City costs TL15 (£4.50) each. A **Cappadocia Museum Pass**, giving free entrance to seven museums, costs TL45 (£14). A walking guide costs £40/80 half-day/full-day.

Cultural considerations

In contrast to the large cities and seaside resorts of Turkey, the women of this rural community **dress very conservatively**, in traditional dress with headscarves. Therefore, modesty is the best policy here. Women must cover their heads when visiting mosques.

CAPPADOCIA HIGHLIGHTS

1 Göreme Open Air Museum This monastic settlement, dating back to the ninth century, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Visit the rock-cut churches late on a week day, when the crowds have cleared and the light is at its best.

2 Underground cities Several underground cities are open to the public, including Kaymaklı and Derinkuyu (the deepest of the underground settlements, descending down seven levels). Be prepared for a fascinating but claustrophobic experience.

3 Fairy chimneys The unique and rock formations are seen at their most spectacular in the aptly named Love Valley or at Pasabag.

4 Ihlara Valley After the well documented delights of the popular Rose Valley et al, venture further afield to walk through the gorgeous Ihlara gorge and its incredible rock churches.

5 Saruhan Caravanserai Built in 1249 to protect camel trains travelling the Silk Road, this beautifully restored caravanserai displays fine examples of Seljuk carving. Whirling Dervish ceremonies are held here.

6 Avanos This riverside town is a pottery hub, jam-packed with ceramic shops. Be prepared for a hard sell, but also enjoy watching the master craftsmen at work on their jugs and bowls – and perhaps have a go at throwing your own.

NEED TO KNOW

Introductions are important in Cappadocia: locals shake hands and greet each other by name in the street. Learn the phrase *"Merhaba, benim adım..."* (Hello, my name is...)

Further reading & information

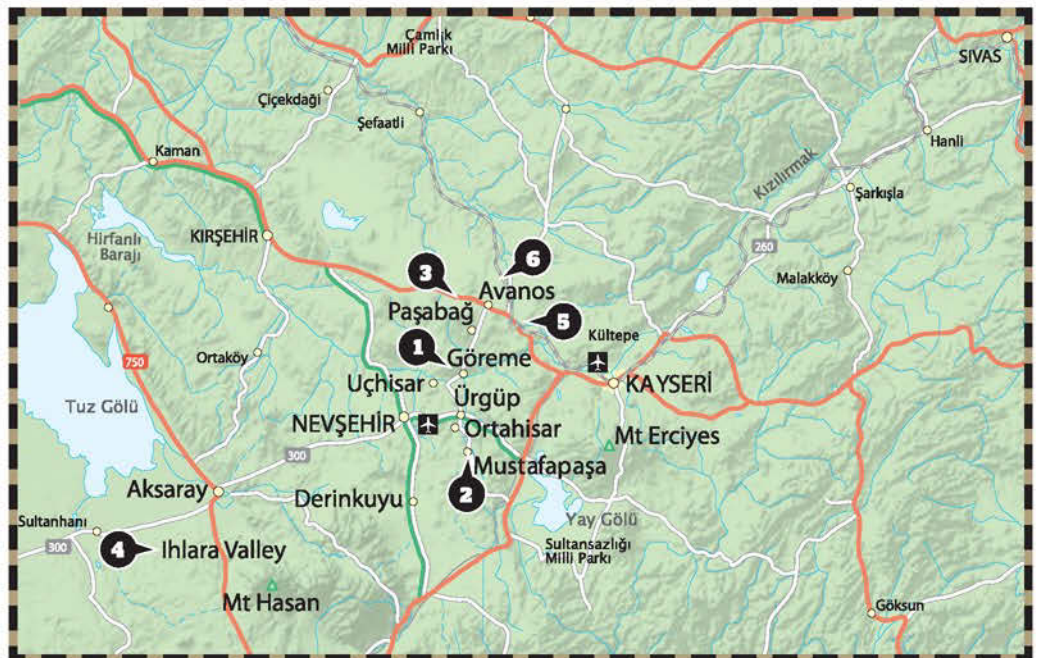
Turkey (Lonely Planet, 2013)
Turkey (Rough Guide, 2013)
Eyewitness Travel Turkey (DK, 2012)
Eastern Turkey (Bradt, 2011)
www.captivatingcappadocia.com – a useful blog
www.turkeyfromtheinside.com – online guide
www.gototurkey.co.uk

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/143 for links to more content from the trip

ARCHIVE ARTICLES

- ◆ Ultimate guide to Istanbul – issue 134
 - ◆ Travel Icon: Cappadocia – issue 104
 - ◆ Turkey's top 5 treks – online
- #### PLANNING GUIDES
- ◆ Turkey guide



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So, if you're a keen walker or cyclist of an inquisitive nature and appreciate good food and wine then why not try a self-guided holiday with Headwater?



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WIN a £5,700 adventure to Mexico and Belize with Exodus

Unique culture, wildlife and scenery – celebrate **Exodus's** 40th birthday with an 11-day trip through Mexico and Belize's coastal highlights

What better way to help **Exodus** celebrate its 40th birthday than to dive headfirst into an adventure? Since February 1974, Exodus has been organising small group adventure holidays for travellers who want to discover those hidden spots that are soaked in culture, nature and excitement. The Exodus team are seasoned, passionate experts, offering advice on more than 500 holidays to over 90 countries worldwide, custom-fitting each costumer with knowledgeable guides, action-packed itineraries and bespoke service.

An Exodus journey could take you leopard spotting in Sri Lanka; mountain biking through the rugged, dusty mountains of Morocco; tackling high-altitude ascents on Kilimanjaro; or being overwhelmed by the abundant marine and wildlife in Mexico and Belize – such as you'd experience on their *Wildlife of Mexico and Belize* trip.

Wild waters, rich history

With its diverse landscapes, buzzing cultural towns and remarkable wildlife, Mexico is the quintessential Exodus destination. Lively Cancun, nestled on the tip of the Yucatan, is the ideal starting point for your Central American adventure. From there the real journey begins.

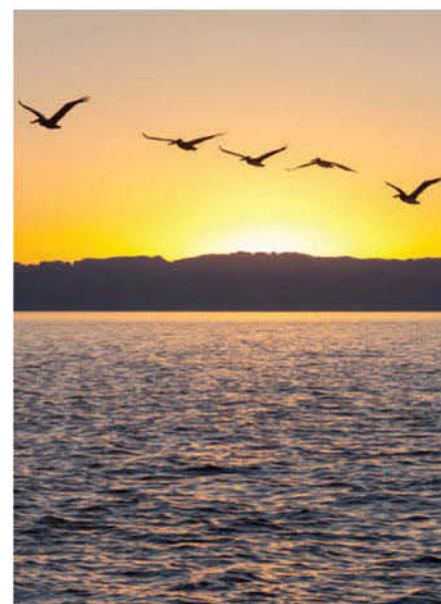
Head to the waters off Isla Mujeres. Here you can explore the glistening and blue water which, although calm-looking, conceals an aquatic wishlist of extraordinary encounters and unique scenery. Case and point – the whale shark. Keep your camera at the ready (lens cap off) as this 12m-long gentle giant glides deceptively fast through the water, occasionally surfacing to sample a peaceful plankton lunch.

Plunge into the waters at Akumal – justifiably translated as 'Place of the Turtles' – just one hour south of Cancun in the Mayan Riviera. These usually shy animals can be seen swimming in their natural habitat, even floating within inches of

oblivious snorkellers. Underwater explorers can also swim the underground caves at Playa del Carmen, decorated from top to bottom with stalactites and stalagmites.

And there are more remarkable animals to see above the waters. Discover over 70 species of birdlife on Isla Contoy, a national park 30km north of Cancun, on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. This small island is an important nesting place for sea birds and it's also a crucial breeding ground for endangered green, hawksbill, loggerhead and leatherback turtles.

Just as omnipresent as the Yucatan Peninsula's wildlife is its Mayan culture, with relics of this lost, ancient civilisation emerging from the landscape. The famous fortress of Tulum played a pivotal role for the Mayan people – a place of worship for royalty – and is now an icon for culture buffs, with its 13th century ruins teetering on a 12m cliff above a pristine beach.



An easy southern commute from Tulum, the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is another great way to experience Mexico's wildlife. With its privately guided boat tours, you can find yourself face-to-flipper with wild manatees, turtles and – on occasion – even a black-tipped shark.

Bountiful Belize

Over the border, Belize combines most of the highlights of Latin America – the mysterious Mayan history, the remarkable wildlife, world-class diving – into one conveniently compact package. The limestone coral island of Caye Caulker is the perfect place to start immersing yourself in the country's culture. Only accessible by water taxi or ferry, this 8km strip is home to over 1,300 villagers who live amid its shady palm trees. Hidden away from the tourist developments of the mainland, this small village and its inhabitants still maintain a distinct flavour built on the local fishing trade.

Aquatic activity is also the big draw at the Hol Chan Marine Reserve – to the north. Alive with nurse sharks, stingrays, brain and elkhorn corals, the island reserve is also host to mangrove forests that act as a nursery for many fish. It is also part of the beautiful Belize Barrier Reef. A section of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, it is the second largest reef in the world, straddling the Belize coast for over 290km.

The reserve's highlight, about 96km out to sea, is the Great Blue Hole – a massive aquatic bullseye for divers and travellers. Midnight parrotfish, Caribbean reef shark and other juvenile species frequent the 125m depths of this perfectly circular sinkhole, fringed by coral reef that traces back to the Yucatan Peninsula.

Teeming with wildlife and culture, these neighbours are the perfect introduction to the best of Latin America and Exodus can help you get stuck into the heart of both worlds – a birthday present you'll never forget.

How to enter

One lucky reader and a friend will win a place on **Exodus' Wildlife of Mexico and Belize** adventure, an 11-day trip across the two countries, including flights and accommodation (RRP £2,899 per person). To enter, just answer this simple question:

Q Which destination was Exodus's first trip in February 1974?

(a) Australia **(b)** Argentina **(c)** Afghanistan

To enter, and for full terms & conditions, visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/competitions or send your answer, name and contact info on a postcard to the Wanderlust office (p2). Closing date for entries is 10 February 2014. Please state 'no offers' if you'd rather not be contacted by *Wanderlust* or the sponsors.

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**Polar
bears**
see p65

■ **This month's experts include:** Top travel blogger Marie Javins, p62 ♦
Ec lodge entrepreneur Sue Page, p65 ♦ Dive master Beth Tierney, p66 ♦
Fever fixer Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth, p68 ♦ Motion capturer Steve Davey, p70 ♦

"Damn, no signal..."
A blogger's work
is never done



■ The *Wanderlust* Masterclass

Could you write a travel blog?

Love venturing to exotic lands then telling your friends? Fancy yourself a keen snapper? Done an extreme challenge you want to share? If the answer is yes, to one or all of these, then blogging could be perfect for you. Showcasing your best words and pics, it allows you to share your experiences and advice with fellow enthusiasts.

What is a blog?

A blog is a diary-type commentary for the web. It isn't the kind of diary that you keep hidden under your pillow though – far from

it. These entries get shared with *the planet*. People with passions use blogs to talk about anything: film, TV, books, food, travel.

It's not complicated, even for the biggest technophobes – most blogging platforms (Wordpress, Blogspot etc) offer readymade, themed templates into which you can drag and drop your content. Once you've signed up you can be blogging in minutes.

Where do I begin?

The thought of joining the blogosphere can be daunting. You need to think of a subject. You need to pick a hosting platform, a blog name and a design. You need to decide

whether to include images and videos, and how. Seek inspiration from blogs you enjoy. Don't plagiarise, of course, but consider what you like about them: what works, what doesn't; are they easy to navigate? Employ the same good practices.

"Before you decide on a name, platform or topic, take a deep breath and close your eyes," says travel blogger Victoria Philpott (vickyflipfloptravels.com). Vicky, who blogs alongside her day job, suggests wannabe bloggers start by conjuring up their happiest travel memory and letting the story flow.

"Great content trumps everything else," adds Alastair Humphreys, professional

adventurer, author and blogger (alastairhumphreys.com). "Great design is only papering over the cracks if the content is weak. However, if you have great content *and* great design, you're onto a winner!"

When it comes to layout, less is more according to Charlie Walker, a journalist who blogs while cycling around the world (charliewalkerexplore.co.uk): "Cluttered webpages are confusing. My blog is not cutting edge in appearance but it's easy to navigate." Pages should be neat, so readers can see what's important. Charlie suggests buying a personalised domain name to mask unwieldy URLs (web addresses).

Blogging platforms such as Wordpress, Blogspot, Blogger, Tumblr and Ghost are all user-friendly - take a look at the different ones and see which you prefer. Using your own photos or videos is best, but you can use free stock-image websites or certain photos from Flickr under the Creative Commons License - be sure to credit pics accordingly; if in doubt check with the owner.

What shall I write?

What you say, and how often, is up to you. Alastair reckons you don't have to travel far to find something to write about. He advocates posting whenever you have an experience: "Start small, start manageable and build from there."

If you're writing for fun or to keep relatives informed, publish an entry whenever you have something to say, suggests Vicky: "The more you write, the more you'll find your style and learn about what you enjoy putting out."

Do be ruthless with your copy: read your post through a few times before putting it live. Blogging no-nos include too much negativity, assuming readers will know what you're talking about, and referring to past articles they may not have read - always include archived links if doing this.

How do I keep it going?

The best way to maintain your blog is to keep travelling. Alastair says the trick is to visit interesting places and do unusual stuff when you get there: "Convey enthusiasm. Be different. Wiggle around until you find your niche. Travel well, write well, be different. The rest will follow."

Vicky uses annual leave, bank holidays and weekends to fit her travel around work; if she's not travelling, she writes about home (London) or previous trips. "I'm obsessed. I'll

TOP TIP

As you change direction in life, so will your blog. Just relax and let your fingers flow - you will naturally find your niche.

do it [blog] on the notes app on my phone, write ideas in notebooks and spend my commute planning my next post," she says. "I also have an endless list of past adventures to write up. I have more ideas than time to write them!"

Charlie writes his ideas while on the road, then uploads the finished content when he finds an internet café: "Most of my blogs are scribbled on sweat-soaked paper scraps while sheltering under a tree from the sun."

But what is the trick to building that elusive blog following? The answer isn't irritating spamming tactics, but publishing consistently engaging content. If you're helping people, and answering their travel questions, they're more likely to come back.

Promote your blog via social media sites but don't bombard your followers with links. Instead, interact with them, ask questions. Also, read up on SEO (search engine optimisation) techniques, so you're more likely to pop up in web searches.

What next?

It's increasingly difficult to turn blogging into money, but sometimes cash can be made through advertising. You need to increase your blog's readership, to make it more attractive to advertisers. Network with bloggers in the same niche, speak to PR and marketing agencies, and create an 'advertise

'If you have great content and great design then you're onto a winner!'

here' page on your site.

There are other benefits to blogging, from improved literacy skills to pulling in prospective employers. A strong following can raise your profile; some companies may sponsor those with well-read sites.

Charlie was funded for 18 months of his four-year expedition though he stresses that blogging is about his love of writing, not a prerequisite for an extreme challenge. "With a view to self-publicising and making a living it's an important tool. However, when anything becomes essential it detracts from the freedom and spontaneity of the pursuit."

Learn more about blogging on Wanderlust's Travel Writing Seminar at the Adventure Travel Show (25-26 Feb). Turn to pg 21 for more info.

Case study

MARIE JAVINS

Comic book editor, travel writer & blogger (mariejavins.blogspot.co.uk)



Why did you decide to start blogging?

In 1998 I went on a Dragoman overland truck trip from

Kathmandu to Damascus. People really responded; I could see there was a need, and I resolved to write for that audience, to travel for them.

How important is your blog name, design and layout?

A consistent URL is vital to helping your readers remember where to look. It's worth paying for a custom one. The design and layout have to be simple. People hate seeing lots of boxes, or sound files that start automatically.

What do you post?

I document all the budget travel and how-to tips I can. I try to include the type of information I look for myself when I travel.

How long did it take to build a following?

It took a few months of steady, daily posting to build up a following. Conversely, it takes only ten days of erratic posting to lose almost all of your followers. Blogs no longer hold the appeal they once did and the days of the single travel blog pulling in a tonne of eyeballs have plummeted with the success of Facebook and Twitter.

How hard is it to juggle blogging with work?

Keeping up with my blogs is the most challenging aspect of travelling and working. After being on an endless minivan journey with your knees up to your chin and no toilet stops, the last thing you want to do is work. But you have to, or you won't be able to afford the trip you're on.

What are your top tips?

Master a few skills. Brush up on the functions of your camera or camera phone. Learn how to make video that doesn't hog bandwidth. Your blogging platform should be whatever you are comfortable with. And last, if it's not fun for you, it's OK to stop.

Take the road less travelled to Mandalay...

"To watch the sun rise from holy Kyaiktiyo Rock, to witness it set over the thousands of temples at Bagan, to meander down the Irrawaddy River to Mandalay – that is to truly experience the magic of Burma." Alex, UK

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Big buggy, big bear
In Churchill, Canada,
specially designed
vehicles allow for safe
bear close-ups



TOP TIP

A great place to see polar bears is Churchill, Canada. Visit October–November when the concentration of bears is at its highest.

■ Instant Expert

Polar bears

So why are we talking about white bears this month?

Ah, well, first things first: polar bears aren't actually white. Their skin is black and their fur is colourless, but those thick, hollow hairs reflect light to give the bears their iconic white-looking coats.

Thanks for that, but the question still remains...

It's National Polar Bear Day on 27 February. And to mark it, leading charitable organisation Polar Bear International (www.polarbearsinternational.org) is asking people to turn down their thermostats by a few degrees, to help reduce carbon emissions and thus help protect the polar bears' Arctic habitat.

Are polar bears really in need of our help?

Unfortunately yes. As climate change continues to threaten their habitat, polar bears are officially listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Rising CO₂ levels are causing sea ice to melt earlier and form later each year, leaving polar bears less time to hunt. Scientists have

predicted that polar bears could become extinct within 100 years if global warming continues at its current rate.

Blimey. I can still see polar bears in the wild, though?

Yes, for now. You can see them in a number of destinations including Canada (home to roughly 60% of the world's polar bears), Alaska, Greenland, Russia and Norway's far-north Svalbard archipelago.

Where's best?

It depends on what kind of tour you prefer. For example, most of the Canadian and US polar bear tours are land-based, with passengers travelling in specially designed snow jeeps or tundra buggies to view the animals. Tours operating in Svalbard are often expedition cruises that glide into fjords and past ice floes; small inflatable Zodiacs can take you thrillingly close to any bears you spot. However, before you book, check that your tour company is dedicated to minimising its impact on the bears and their environment.

Will do.

Good – that's a bear necessity!

■ 5-step guide to...

OPENING A HOTEL OVERSEAS

1 Don't let your heart rule your head. Ultimately this is a business decision not just a lifestyle choice.

2 Do your research and set a budget. Think about all costs including land, design and build as well as saving for unexpected costs. When it comes to selecting a building contractor, choose one you can trust.

3 Familiarise yourself with local laws. Also, learn the language – this will help you pick up on any nuances. Try to build up a good relationship with local officials; treat them with respect.

4 Build up a good network of travel agents and staff. These will be key to your future success. Ensure travel agents are aware of your unique selling point. Invest time and effort in staff – they will become an invaluable part of your team.

5 Know what you're getting yourself into. Moving to a new country is a big enough leap but when this is teamed with the pressures of starting a business it is not going to be an easy call. You may have a beautiful beach and pool but you won't spend much time admiring it. The hotel business is really hard work: if people came to this with no prior experience, it would be hard to hit the ground running. That isn't to say there aren't huge benefits: the weather, breathtaking views, the thrill of the challenge... 

Tips from Sue and Andrew Page, who built, own and run the boutique Echo Beach Hotel in Zanzibar (echo beach hotel.com)

ASK THE EXPERTS

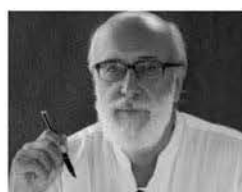
The woes of watermelons, where to learn to dive, Sri Lanka in a fortnight and the best ways to get around Japan. Our experts answer your travel queries...

THE EXPERTS



KYLIE CLARK

Japan expert & Head of PR & Marketing at JNTO (seejapan.co.uk)



ROYSTON ELLIS

Author of *Bradt Guide to Sri Lanka* (roystonellis.com/blog)



BETH TIERNEY

Diving expert, author of *Footprint Guides' Diving the World* (seafocus.com)



MATTHEW LIGHTFOOT

Driving expert, founder of driverabroad.com

Q I've heard I should avoid watermelons in Asia. Is that true? And are there other healthy-seeming foods I shouldn't eat?

Thomas Davis, by email

A I haven't been able to get a definitive answer, backed up with real science, but there is certainly anecdotal evidence suggesting watermelons can be hazardous. In the subcontinent they are sold by weight and sellers sometimes puncture the fruit then soak them in unclean water – and even storm drains – to increase the profit.

Watermelons and cucumbers certainly delay digestion of food and increase the time it sits in the stomach, so if you are already feeling queasy, these make you feel worse. It is wise to avoid any fruit or vegetable with broken skin – unless it is to be cooked before eating.

Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth, travel health guru

Q I've got two weeks – how much of Sri Lanka can I see in that time?

Melanie Terry, by email

A It depends how you travel. Hire a car with driver (from £45 a day) and you can visit the main sites (Cultural Triangle, Elephant Orphanage, Peradeniya Gardens, Kandy, hill country, Yala game park, Galle and

beaches) in comfort, allowing spontaneous stops to take photos, buy fruit from wayside vendors or trek to a waterfall.

By public transport, there are trains with seats bookable online (rajadhani.lk; exporail.lk); second and third class will be standing room only. Avoid long-distance buses (crazy driving) but local ones between villages can be fun.

Start with a couple of nights in Colombo to recover from the flight, confirm train bookings and to see the town. Head to Anuradhapura and Kandy for a couple of nights in each. Then go to Nuwara Eliya (colonial hill station), Haputale (tea country) and Tissa (for Yala) for one night in each. Next, travel along the south coast to Galle

(fortress town and Unawatuna beach) for one or two nights. Finish up on the west coast for two nights beachside in Hikkaduwa or Bentota, from where

it's easy to access the airport.

Royston Ellis, author of the new Bradt Guide to Sri Lanka

Q I want to learn to dive on colourful reefs, rather than in a UK pool, but can't afford to go to Australia. What are the best safe but cheaper alternatives?

Helen Cardwell, London

SPECIAL OFFER!

Bradt is offering readers 40% off its new Sri Lanka guide; visit www.bradtguides.com before 31 March 2014 and quote code 'SLWANDERLUST' at checkout

A The rate for doing a PADI Open Water course is pretty much the same wherever you go, so keeping your costs down is more about finding flight and accommodation options that suit your budget.

The Egyptian Red Sea is the obvious choice: it's close and package rates are fantastic value. Although there has been some political unrest in the country, the Red Sea coast has remained safe. However, if you are uncomfortable with that idea, Aqaba in Jordan has similar marine life and many safe and reliable dive operations. For both of these, choose your time of year carefully, as the water is cold in the winter months.

If you can go a bit further, for pretty postcard-type underwater landscapes, your next best options would be Grenada in the



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'The Japan Rail Pass continues to be a great option – it costs £169 for seven days of unlimited travel, including on speedy bullet trains'

■ Insiders' Guide to...

BURMA



Adventure tour operator Exodus (exodus.co.uk) celebrates its 40th year in February. Exodus's Burma Product Specialist, Emma Garrick, gives her tips on one of 2014's hottest destinations...

TO STAY: Pine Hill, in laid-back Kalaw, is a cluster of painted wooden cottages. Relax on your veranda with a beer and reflect on your trek into the surrounding Palaung and Danu villages.

TO EXPLORE: Escape the crowds at Bagan by heading to one of the site's lesser-visited temples for your sunset or sunrise view. Temples such as Shwesandaw Paya are rammed at dusk; venture further afield on bikes to smaller ones such as Gubyaukgyi and you'll see an equally impressive landscape but without the crowds.

TO EAT: Try some of the fantastic, small, modest-looking restaurants in the cities, especially Yangon and Mandalay. Order a curry and you'll be surrounded by a variety of accompanying dishes, perfect for meat-eaters and vegetarians alike.

TO RELAX: Spend the day on Inle Lake. It's a wonderfully serene experience, and is a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the Nyaungshwe port area. After setting off from the port, the lake quickly opens out and you can easily while away a few hours gliding past the stilted floating villages and watching the fishermen paddling their boats with one leg.

 **exodus**
www.exodus.co.uk

Caribbean or the Maldives. Both places can be reached on package trips too, and will have lovely, warm water all year round and the type of conditions that make learning to dive a real pleasure – unlike a swimming pool in the UK. **Beth Tierney runs SeaFocus.com and is author of Footprint's Diving the World**

Q What is the best way to get around Japan independently?
Michael Ward, by email

A We used to suggest travellers stick to trains and use the convenient, great-value Japan Rail Pass. However, in recent years a range of transport options has opened up for travellers.

In 2011, low-cost airlines launched, making it cheaper to

get to Okinawa and Hokkaido. Currently there is Jetstar Japan (jetstar.com) and Peach (flypeach.com); Vanilla Air (vanilla-air.com/en) launched in December 2013. Also, ANA and JAL offer discounted domestic flights for those flying with them internationally.

Japan Experience (japan-experience.com) opened an office in London this summer offering reasonably priced rental car services with English GPS and suggested road-trip itineraries.

Bus operator Willer Travel (willerexpress.com) is striving to make buses more comfortable. It has introduced 'cocoon' seats on some routes, as well as 'theatre' seats that have screens for movies and gaming. A Willers bus trip from Tokyo to Kyoto costs from ¥2,160 (£13.25).

The Japan Rail Pass continues to be a great option. It's only available to visitors (not residents of Japan) and costs around £169 for seven days of unlimited travel, including on speedy bullet trains.

For a free info pack, contact the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) at www.seejapan.co.uk.

Kylie Clark, Head of PR, JNTO
(seejapan.co.uk)

Q What do I need to carry in, or display on, my car when driving in Europe? Are their specific laws I need to be aware of?

Louise Ablett, by email

A The many rules and regulations vary depending on what countries you're driving through and can be liable to change.

Most are basic common sense such as having a GB sticker and headlight beam adaptors on your vehicle plus a warning triangle in the boot.

However, some can come as a surprise; for instance, in France you must carry a personal alcohol breathalyser test at all times.

Always check online before travelling, and consult different resources to ensure advice is up to date. The AA and RAC provide handy checklists for each European country. The Foreign Office covers 'in car' regulations as well as local driving rules. Using a combination of these sites, plus DriverAbroad.com for additional info on local driving styles and likely road conditions, should ensure that you and your vehicle are fully prepared.

Matthew Lightfoot,
driverabroad.com 



TRAVEL CLINIC

with Doctor Jane



Yellow fever: vaccine shortfall?

Will a shortage of virus vaccine alter your travel plans this winter? And do you need a yellow fever certificate?

Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth explains

Yellow fever is a killer. The World Health Organisation estimates that there are

200,000 cases each year, causing 30,000 deaths. Fortunately deaths in travellers are rare, largely due to the excellent efficacy of the yellow fever vaccine. The problem is, that vaccine is currently in short supply.

There has been an unforeseen delay in its production. The manufacturer, Sanofi Pasteur MSD, is working to produce more, and is helping individuals find vaccination centres that have stock. Some clinics are maximising vaccine delivery and reducing waste by holding specific yellow fever immunisation days. However, as some countries insist on visitors holding a valid yellow fever vaccination certificate in order to enter, I foresee some travellers having to choose their destinations carefully – and

even consider avoiding yellow fever regions – because of this serious issue.

How dangerous is yellow fever?

Yellow fever is a virus spread by day-active *Aedes* mosquitoes. The disease breaks out unpredictably in Africa and tropical Latin America. The severity of the illness is variable. Three to six days after the infective mosquito bite, victims experience muscle aches, fever, headache, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting. At this stage it's hard to differentiate from flu and myriad other causes of fever in travellers.



Often victims will start to recover three to four days after the start of symptoms; however, up to a quarter relapse into a very serious phase, when the blood's ability to clot is compromised (people bleed from gums and internally) and jaundice starts. Hospital treatment is 'supportive', which means there is no cure but sometimes intervention in intensive care will save a life. Up to half of patients who develop the serious form of the disease die.

Why the fuss about the certificate?

A yellow fever International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis (ICVP) is required for travel to some countries – but rules are nothing to do with protecting individual travellers from catching the disease.

Yellow fever is spread from infected people or monkeys to other victims by way of *Aedes*

mosquito bites. *Aedes* are widespread: they are found all over Asia, and in the warmer regions of North America and Europe, which means there is a risk that yellow fever could expand beyond its current range. Indeed, it was originally an African infection that spread to the Americas, probably via *Aedes* hitching lifts aboard slave ships.

The purpose of the ICVP is to protect the host country from visitors importing the disease and seeding it there. This means that someone travelling from Europe to a yellow fever risk-zone may not be required



Fatal fever
Could a vaccine
shortage curtail
your travel plans?

NEED TO KNOW

The yellow fever vaccine
and the International
Vaccination Certificate
costs around £72 from
travel clinics.

Is the vaccine effective?

Yes, the vaccine is fully protective. Also, although it officially protects for ten years, evidence is emerging that one single dose gives lifelong immunity. However, international regulations are somewhat lagging behind scientific understanding and it's hard to know when the rules will change at borders; currently there is still a requirement to show that immunisation has been administered some time between ten days and ten years previously.

Are there side effects?

Side effects are common. Between 10% and 30% of people receiving the vaccine report mild fever, arm soreness, headache or aches. There have been reports of severe reactions, but this is rare – estimated at less than five cases per million doses.

The chance of a severe reaction is five times greater in people over the age of 60; even so, the risk is low, at one per 40,000 doses. This may need to be considered when older travellers who've never received the vaccine plan a trip to a yellow fever risk area. Vaccination waivers can be issued on medical grounds by travel clinics – although, obviously, having a waiver will not protect the traveller from contracting yellow fever. Bite avoidance is key. *Aedes*, which bite from dawn to dusk, are repelled by DEET and EX-4, though note they can bite through thin shirts and will bite any exposed skin – not just ankles, like malarial mosquitoes.



Is the vaccine safe for everyone?

No. Children under five months must not receive yellow fever vaccine, nor must people who are immunosuppressed (eg cancer patients) and those who take steroid tablets in high doses (more than 40mg prednisolone). It is also unsuitable for those with an egg allergy.

People who may not be able to receive yellow fever vaccine include children under nine months, pregnant and breast-feeding women, and people with HIV and low CD4 counts.

What is forced immunisation?

If there is a yellow fever outbreak, occasionally public health workers will immunise around it, effectively trying to make a fire break. This means that buses in the vicinity could be stopped and all passengers given the vaccine; it also means border officials might insist on giving the immunisation. Such situations can be alarming as it is not possible to be sure how sterile the needles are. Holding a vaccination certificate should prevent forced immunisation; a waiver may not. 

Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth's new site is www.wilson-howarth.com

'If you've visited an at-risk destination in the weeks just before entering another country, you will need a certificate'

to prove that they have been immunised, whereas people travelling between countries with yellow fever will need to show a certificate. Note that if you've visited a risk destination in the weeks just before entering another country, you will need a certificate. For instance, Kenya doesn't require travellers coming from the UK to hold a certificate, but if you'd recently

returned from a trip to Uganda, then you would need an ICVP.

What is crucial is that people understand the difference between their individual risk and the local immigration requirements. Just because your destination does not require you to have an ICVP in order to enter the country, that doesn't mean that there is no yellow fever risk there.

TAKE BETTER TRAVEL PHOTOS



Want to take
a photo like this?

Steve Davey

helps you capture the
magic of the travel
moment – this issue,
we learn about panning...

Photography can record motion to create images that are unlike anything that you can see with the human eye. A slow shutter speed will allow your subject to blur; a brief shutter speed will freeze all movement, leaving your subject hanging in the air or in the case of water, bubbling and frothing.

Some subjects though don't suit either treatment. A car with the motion frozen, simply looks stationary; if blurred, reduced to a smudge. Luckily there's an option that blends both techniques: panning, where you move the camera in sync with the subject, keeping it relatively sharp, but blurring the background to give the impression of movement.

Panning can be a great technique when conditions aren't ideal: as it relies on a slow shutter speed, you can pan in poor light and weather conditions. It's a neat way to convey motion and dynamism, which is why I used the technique to shoot passing traffic on a rainy day in Hanoi. I wanted to create the buzz of traffic and it was a great way of obscuring a dull background, while leaving the subject recognisable. 

Steve leads his own range of travel photography tours. www.BetterTravelPhotography.com

1 Use a slow shutter speed

Select a slow shutter speed to allow enough blurring of the background. Anything between a second and a 1/15th second depending on the speed of movement. Don't use such a slow speed so that your pan is too long, or the results won't be smooth and your subject won't be recognisable enough. Aim to move the camera over an angle of 10° to 30° as a rule of thumb, and experiment with different settings.

2 Direction of movement

If the movement is largely perpendicular to you and you use a telephoto lens setting then the panning motion will appear quite flat. If the direction of movement is largely coming towards you and you use a wider zoom setting then the effect is more dynamic and appears to explode towards you.

3 Watch your focus

The point of panning is for the subject to be recognisable and the background to be blurred with the motion. This effect is enhanced if the subject is in focus. Use a sport autofocus mode with a continuous focussing mode and follow the subject for a short while before tripping the shutter so that the camera can lock the focus on the subject.

4 Smooth panning

For the best effects, pan smoothly. Think of a golf swing: track your subject for a little while before you take a picture, shoot a couple of shots and then follow through for the smoothest blur on the background, without any camera shake on the subject!

5 Be recognisable

Your picture will be more effective if the sharper part of the picture is recognisable. The hat in this picture is typical of Vietnam, which means that it gives the picture a sense of place.



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INSUREANDGO



■ Traveller's Guide To...

INSULATED JACKETS

Perfect for snowy or cold destinations, an insulated jacket will keep you warm whether you're winter walking, snowmobiling or watching the northern lights – plus, when packed, it can double up as a great travel pillow!

FILLING

Down jackets are filled with goose or duck feathers and offer a great warmth-to-weight ratio. The feathers 'loft' – that is, capture warm air between them – which keeps you warm. The problem with natural down is that it stops working when wet (if not coated in a hydrophobic treatment) so you get cold. Down jackets are also at the higher end of the price scale.

The alternative is synthetic insulation – which all jackets in this test feature. This also offers a great weight-to-warmth ratio, though is normally slightly heavier than down. It also tends to be cheaper. The key thing is that, even when wet, synthetic insulation will keep you warm – vital when most insulated jackets are water resistant, not waterproof.

FIT

Some jackets will be unisex; some will be cut in specific men's or women's fits. All the jackets in this test are available in both men's and women's versions (apart from one unisex model) – both names are mentioned where they differ.

DRAUGHT EXCLUDERS

You will lose heat if the jacket sleeves don't fit flush to your arm. Look for elasticated cuffs or Velcro adjusters to help prevent this. Also look for an adjustable bottom hem (to eliminate draught) and a panel of fabric behind the zip (this keeps cold air out). A fleecy chinguard is good for comfort.

HOOD

Some jackets have them, some don't. A hood is a useful addition to help keep you warm, just be sure it fits your head well or is adjustable.

WEIGHT

This is a key concern for any traveller. The good news is that insulated jackets offer great warmth for a light weight. To find out which jacket is warmest, simply try several on, one after the other – you'll be able to feel the difference. Warmer tends to mean bulkier and heavier, so you need to find the balance that's right for you.

POCKETS

Not only good for stashing items such as compact cameras and smartphones but also the key place for warming up cold hands – make sure the pockets fit your mitts well.

SIZE

To ensure the jacket fits properly, lift your arms above your head (the cuffs shouldn't rise up) and bend over (it should still cover your waist – look for a scooped bottom to keep your back warm).



Roadtest

We test out your essential travel kit, so you don't have to...



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VALUE
BUY

RESULT

Ice Bird Padded Jacket **£32**

THE TEST: By far the cheapest on test, there's still a surprising number of desirable features on the Ice Bird: an adjustable hem to keep out cold air, a draught excluder behind the main zip, well-sized zippable pockets, elasticated cuffs. But as you'd expect of something at this price, the finishing touches are missing – there is no covering over the cuffs so the ruffled fabric is a bit uncomfortable at the wrist. Also there's no hood and no scoop at the bottom, which would help keep your back warm.

The fit is not as well tailored as it is in those jackets at the higher end of the price scale, which may not matter to some, but may not be as good on some body shapes. When travelling it would undoubtedly keep you warm, but it is much bulkier than most here and comes in as the second-heaviest on test (505g, size 12).

THE VERDICT: Heavier, bulkier and lacking in some of the features you get when you pay more, but for those on a tight budget this is a good option.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

www.resultclothing.com



SPRAYWAY

Firebird/Reactor **£80**

THE TEST: The tailoring is the first thing you notice when comparing this to the Ice Bird: it cuts a closer fit. The insulation is also zoned – thicker in the parts of your body that don't move about (ie torso) but thinner in your arms, so movement is not restricted. That means a smaller, more packable jacket and a lower weight (424g, size 10). The elasticated cuffs are covered in soft lycra making them more comfortable. The hemline is adjustable to help keep warm air in and the fleece-lined pockets are a good size. The zipped pockets feature reflective pull tabs, making them easy to find and operate with gloves on. There's a draught excluder behind the main zip and a covered chinguard for comfort.

A couple of things could be improved. The hood is only adjustable at the back (not around the face) and doesn't move with your head as well as others. The cuffs are also not as close fitting as some on test.

THE VERDICT: Some nice features and a good tailored fit that, despite some niggles, make this jacket good value for money.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

www.sprayway.com



Wanderlust
BEST IN
TEST

MONTANE

Prism Jacket **£100**

THE TEST: This jacket is money well spent. It not only features the key elements – hood, scooped bottom, draught excluder behind the main zip, adjustable hem, covered chinguard – but also some excellent extras. For instance, the hood is not only adjustable, but is big enough to take a helmet – great if you're trying snowy activities. It's also got a wire peak so re-shaping is easy. Behind the hood there's even a Velcro tab so you can roll the hood away when you don't need it. The body length is ideal, being long and well cut. The sleeves are articulated, allowing good freedom of movement.

A couple of tweaks would make it perfect. For instance the cuffs are elasticated and fit well, but could have benefited from a soft covering for more comfort. The tags on the zips could have been longer (though the sticky coating does help with grip). This is the lightest jacket on test (360g, size 10).

THE VERDICT: A light, feature-packed option that is priced well and ideal for those needing warmth and wanting to stay active.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

www.montane.co.uk



How we did the test...

We asked a range of gear manufacturers to submit insulated jackets most suitable for travellers: jackets with great features that are warm, packable and low weight. From the 12 we were sent our editor, Phoebe Smith, took them out on the road to see which performed best. The six here are all “Wanderlust Approved”, with a Value Buy for those on a tight budget and Best in Test for the overall best buy, being indicated.



LOWE ALPINE Glacier Point £120

THE TEST: Another well-equipped jacket that offers a nice fit and a good level of warmth. It's middle of the road weight-wise (448g, size 10) but you can instantly feel the warmth when you put it on. The cut is tapered, keeping it close to the body, and the length is great. The bottom has a slight scoop and a useful adjustable hem, which helps eliminate draughts.

The cuffs are elasticated and covered in soft fabric making them comfy; the hood is also elasticated and covered around the rim – both fit and move well, showing extra money spent makes for a better overall fit. The arms are articulated for good movement. A covered chinguard protects your face from the cold of the zip. The pockets are a good size and there's a well-sized draught excluder behind the main zip. It's not the cheapest but you do get all the key features and a good warmth-to-weight ratio.

THE VERDICT: All the features you need, with a good fit; only missed out on top spot due to non-adjustable hood and higher price.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

www.lowealpine.com



PÁRAMO Torres Jacket £140

THE TEST: This jacket makes you feel instantly warm. It's jam-packed with insulating filling making it the biggest jacket on test. If you really feel the cold, this is the one for you. You do pay for it with weight though: it's the heaviest jacket here (600g, S) – but it would roll up into an excellent pillow!

This model is unisex so some women and smaller men may feel it's a bit big. It's made for throwing on over the top of other jackets to warm you up fast, which accounts for the size and shape. The hemline is elasticated rather than adjustable, but it's been made to fit well no matter what you're wearing underneath; because of that there is no scooped bottom. The cuffs are covered and elasticated, and there's a generous draught excluder behind the main zip. There's a chinguard – though it's not covered. The pockets are a good size and the hood is adjustable. The tags on the zips make them easy to use with gloves on.

THE VERDICT: Instantly warm, with fantastic features, but its heavier weight and bulk may be a turn off for some.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

www.paramo.co.uk



BERGHAUS Ignite Hoody £150

THE TEST: If money is no object then this offers all the features you need, in a modern, athletic cut. The hemline is adjustable while also offering a good-sized scooped bottom. The pockets are zippable and accommodate hands easily; they also feature grip tags so they're easy to operate in gloves. Behind the main zip is a more than adequate draught excluder. Weight-wise it's excellent, being the second-lightest (404g, size 10), and it feels very warm when you put it on.

The cuffs are elasticated and fit closely – the only downside is that they're not covered, though this would have added to the weight. The chinguard is covered with soft fabric. Overall it's nicely cut with a long length, which feels good on. The hood is well-fitting and adjustable both at the rim and the back; a semi-structured peak helps it keep its shape after packing. It's all here. The only catch is that you have to pay for it.

THE VERDICT: Everything you could need from an insulated jacket – if you have the extra cash to spare.

IN BRIEF

Features: ★★★★★

Design: ★★★★★

Comfort: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

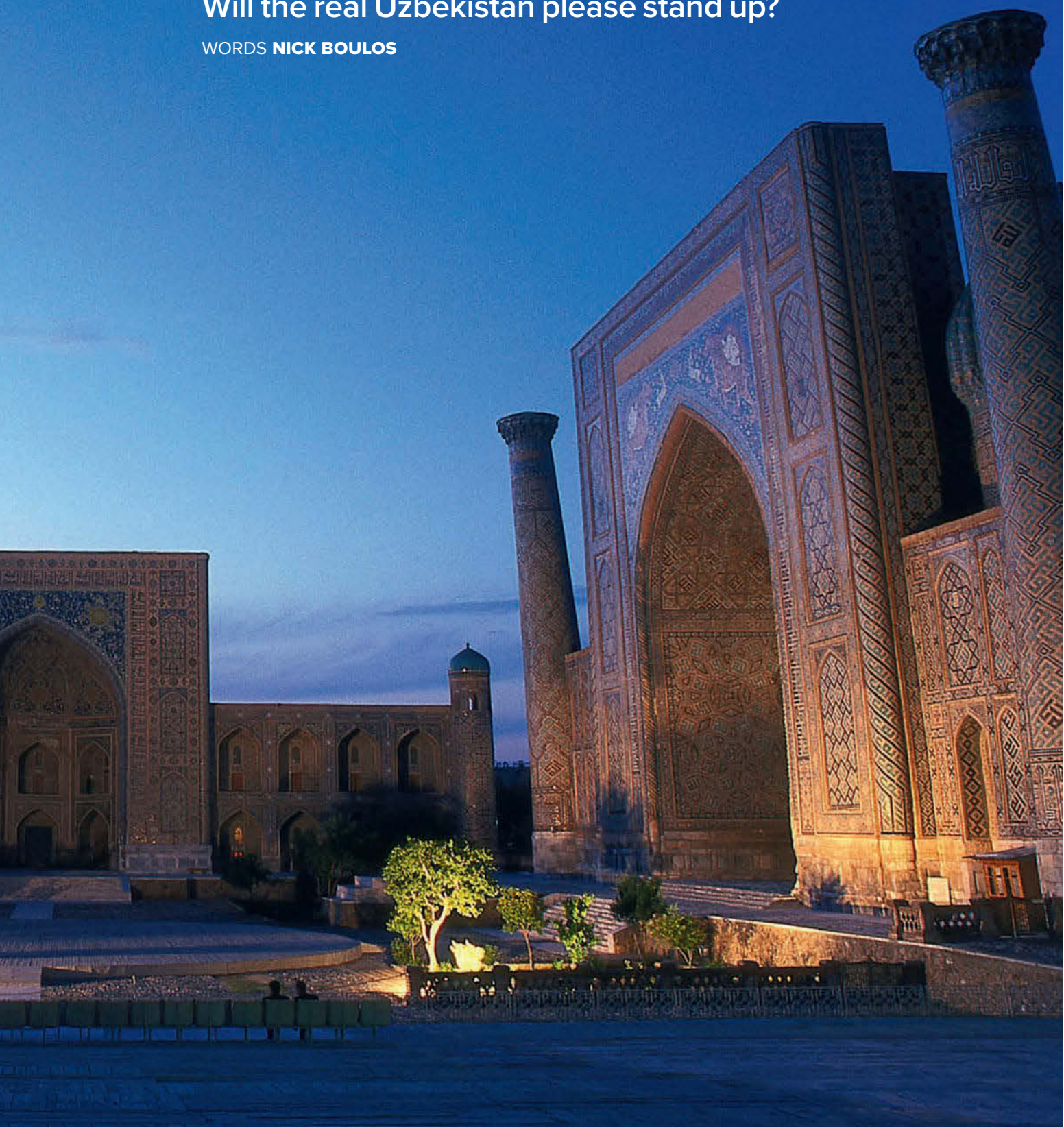
www.berghaus.com



Behind the silk curtain

This Silk Road stop-off is a mix of murderous despots, Great Game skulduggery and dubious politics with matchless architecture and effusive hospitality. Will the real Uzbekistan please stand up?

WORDS **NICK BOULOS**







Love and pride

The 'courage' memorial to the 1966 earthquake in Tashkent now makes for a wedding photo backdrop; (left) the Tilla Kari – or 'gold-covered' – madressa dominates the UNESCO-listed Registan Square
Previous page
 Dusk falls over Registan Square

“**S**he was so beautiful even the birds fell in love with her.” Akbar paused, his softly spoken words hanging in the early evening air. He reached for the chipped teapot and poured another cup. “They wrapped her in the finest silk to protect such timeless beauty, but when it was unravelled she had vanished into thin air.

“They say her spirit lives on in the *suzani* [traditional embroidered textiles],” he continued. “You must look deep into the patterns to see her face.” We sat discussing old Uzbek legends in Akbar’s quiet courtyard, where lanterns twinkled under the pomegranate tree and the murmur of Tashkent could be heard beyond the high stone walls.

Like Akbar, I, too, was fascinated by the tales of the Silk Road: the good, the bad and the gruesome. The original overland odyssey, it has long lured travellers. For centuries, caravans of 1,000 camels crossed Central Asia trading everything from gold to gunpowder. Now it was my turn to follow in their hoof-steps.

Land of love?

Concentrating on landlocked Uzbekistan, I’d anticipated the history and stop-in-your-tracks architecture but what I hadn’t expected from this land of bloodthirsty warlords and evil emirs was such a soppy side. Love is all around in Uzbekistan. It’s everywhere you go.

Every town, village and city seemed full of young brides wearing sombre expressions and poufy dresses. They paraded around with their new hubbies and an army of friends, stopping for photos in front of even the most unlikely backdrops. For instance, the

imposing Courage Monument in capital Tashkent – a memorial to the 1966 earthquake, a night likened to being ‘on the back of a berserk camel’ – doesn’t exactly scream romance. But there were the couples, doe-eyed and striking a pose.

Another love story was being played out in the quiet village of Botali, deep in the Uzbek countryside. In the back garden of an old farmhouse, Shohruh was busy shifting bales of straw. His new wife, Gulnora, stood on the doorstep, waving to us with one hand and rubbing her baby bump with the other. We were immediately welcomed inside, such is the way of Uzbek hospitality.

In the middle of the cramped and musky living room was a chest filled with the 12 outfits Gulnora wore during their three-day wedding. Sequined veils, ornate hats and colourful coats were passed around with an open invitation to try them on. I politely declined.

Shohruh stood in the doorway laughing and the couple gazed into each other’s eyes. It was a touching encounter with two childhood sweethearts. Or maybe not. It turned out that this was a union of chance; the result of one misdialled digit. Gulnora had answered the phone one day, to Shohruh’s wrong number. She was about to hang up but Shohruh, liking her voice, kept her talking. They met 27 days later. The rest is history.

Heroes & villains

Sadly not all the tales in these parts are quite so heart warming. Our journey from Tashkent took us 290km south-west across desert steppes and river valleys to the ancient city of Samarkand, which ►

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OF THE MADRASAH,
THE REGISTAN, SAMARKAND.

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Monument valley
The mighty Registan
in the heart of
Samarkand; (below)
A statue of the local
hero – and brutal ruler
– Timerlane



‘Timerlane remains a much-loved figurehead in Uzbekistan; statues of him pop up across the country. Yet he seemed an odd choice for a national hero’

◀ has welcomed some of history’s most feared figures. Founded in the fifth century BC, it’s one of the oldest cities in the world, a place that has seen immense power and spectacular decline.

Destroyed by both Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, the splendour that stands today is largely the handiwork of Timur, the cold-blooded warlord whose 14th-century empire stretched from India to Russia. Timur became known as Timerlane (often Tamerlane in the West) and Timur the lame after sustaining a limp caused by an arrow wound. He was a violent man with a habit of leaving severed heads in his wake; it’s reckoned more than 17 million people died as a result of his military quests. “The whole world is not large enough for two kings,” he once said.

Timur felt at home in Samarkand. Fresh from a trip to Delhi, he made it his capital in 1370, vowing to create a mosque without parallel. Slaves set to work, while 95 Indian elephants hauled the heavy slabs of marble.

With great pride, Tahir led us to the Registan – meaning ‘sandy place’ in Persian, a nod to the dunes that once rose here. We stood in what must be the grandest public square on earth, flanked by three majestic *medressas* (Islamic schools) and mosques of turquoise tiles and floral mosaics. Pigeons perched on the glazed domes, which looked like giant Christmas baubles.

The most impressive medressa was built in 1420 by Timerlane’s intellectual grandson, Ulugbek. The ground

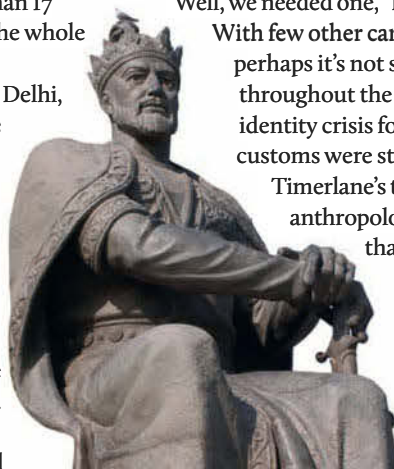
floor, once reserved for learned scholars, now houses souvenir stalls selling puppets and silk shawls. Members of the Timurid dynasty, including Timerlane and Ulugbek, were laid to rest in the nearby Gur Emir mausoleum. The air inside was cool; the walls covered in stars, frescoes, holy scriptures and gold leaf. Hushed conversations stopped suddenly as many dropped to their knees in prayer.

Despite his many flaws, Timerlane remains a much-loved figurehead in Uzbekistan; statues of him pop up across the country. Yet he seemed an odd choice for a national hero, I suggested to Tahir. “Well, we needed one,” he replied simply, and slightly defensively.

With few other candidates (did nobody think of Ulugbek?), perhaps it’s not so strange. Life under Soviet rule throughout the 20th century created something of an identity crisis for Uzbeks whose language, culture and customs were stamped out by the Russians.

Timerlane’s tomb was opened in June 1941 by a Soviet anthropologist who apparently found an inscription that read: ‘Whoever opens this shall unleash an invader more fearsome than I’. Days later, Hitler invaded Russia.

South-east of the Registan is Samarkand’s Old Town. Tashkent Street was largely empty, barely a soul to be seen along the parade of polished shops. The place didn’t ►





Highs & loaves

A friendly local of the village of Botali; the 47-metre tall Kalon minaret; the ladies of Khiva are a colourful bunch; a vendor sells the traditional loaves of Samarkand; other goods on offer in the country's busy market



‘Market vendors wrapped up under fur-trimmed hats. Stocky women wandered past wearing colourful quilt-like dressing gowns. Some of them smiled, revealing full sets of gold teeth, a bit like 007-villain Jaws’



◀ seem very, well, old. “That’s because it was all done up in 2010,” beamed Tahir.

I was baffled. The hardest thing about travelling in Uzbekistan is not coping with the food or the bumpy roads but deciphering reality from what’s been created to give a good impression. This was a prime example.

The side roads leading away from Tashkent Street had been sealed by white walls beyond that, we learned, was the real old town. A small door stood ajar. There was only one thing for it...

We pressed through and into another world of mud houses, narrow alleys and forgotten old synagogues. The smell of freshly baked bread lingered on Khudzhum Street. Boys whizzed by on bicycles and old men in *doppi* hats sat around flowing fountains. Most people, however, seemed to be at the market, shopping for shiny loaves, sugar-dusted peanuts, dates and boiled eggs stacked high in rusty prams.

Reality bites

Heading west, it was a long day’s drive to Bukhara – a 270km journey that took six days for early travellers on camelback. Flashing past the window were scenes of rural life: parched fields, the odd farmer and donkey, desolate communities in a barren land. Life here looked tough but Tahir wouldn’t hear of it. “Farmers were given free land,” he told us. “Everybody in Uzbekistan has a house and a car, and everybody loves the president.”

Ah, yes, the president. Despite Uzbekistan’s constitution limiting leaders to two terms, Islam Karimov has been in continuous power since 1990, guiding the country through independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. He rules with an iron fist, and rumours of rigged elections and torture abound; two dissidents were allegedly boiled alive in 2002.

With miles of open road ahead, it seemed a good time to ask Tahir about the realities of life in Uzbekistan. Our questions were rebuffed as he continued to paint a picture of a place that made Disneyland look like the underworld. Drugs, prostitution, suicide, sex before marriage, homosexuality? “No, not here in Uzbekistan,” he repeated.

Minarets & murder

The following day, a stiff breeze rushed through the open courtyards and cosy carpet shops of Bukhara. Market vendors wrapped up under fur-trimmed hats. Stocky women wandered past wearing colourful quilt-like dressing gowns. Some of them smiled, revealing full sets of gold teeth, a bit like 007 villain Jaws. Others had thick, bushy monobrows – a sign of exceptional beauty in Uzbekistan; those not naturally blessed with one continuous eyebrow are known to create the look by filling in the gap with make-up.

The wind also whipped around the tall Kalon minaret. At 47m, it was probably the tallest building in Central Asia upon completion in 1127. Even Genghis Khan, whose horse trampled children when he arrived in 1220, was impressed. He declared it the only building to be spared.

Thieves and criminals were once thrown to their deaths from the minaret’s top – one woman survived by using her skirt as a parachute. People would gather to watch this justice-in-action, but there were no signs of any crowds today. We strolled around the deserted complex of aqua domes and sand-coloured archways, sharing it with a lone lady sat under a mulberry tree.

The cosy Silk Road Teahouse proved to be the perfect retreat from the November chill. Beyond its heavy wooden doors was an interior heady with the smell of ginger and cardamom, cinnamon and cloves. I clutched a cup of saffron tea tightly as the wind howled outside.

Warmed up, we journeyed to the ruins of Bukhara’s oldest building, the Ark. A royal residence from the fifth century, the fortress rose ▶





Looming doom
The Ark fortress of Bukhara has a suitably formidable history; (left) the deserted historical heart of Bukhara

‘Thieves and criminals were once thrown to their deaths from the minaret’s top – one woman survived by using her skirt as a parachute’

◀ formidably, its tall turrets and bastions looming like giant sandcastles. It was here, in 1842, that two British army officers met a grizzly end. Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly were two unlucky players in the ‘Great Game’ of espionage between Russia and Britain. And they didn’t experience quite the same Uzbek hospitality that I’d encountered.

Stoddart had come here to seek the allegiance of Emir Nasrullah Khan, but had the audacity to remain on horseback rather than approaching on foot; worse, he arrived empty handed, bearing no gifts nor letter from Queen Victoria. This displeased the Emir, and Stoddart was imprisoned. Conolly arrived later, tasked with negotiating Stoddart’s release, but found himself thrown into a vermin-infested bug pit too. Eventually the pair were hauled out and watched their own graves being dug before their heads were cut off with a knife.

Cheers!

Locals are rather more receptive to visitors these days. Dinner that evening was a homecooked feast in an 18th-century house tucked down one of Bukhara’s darkened backstreets. Mr Raham was our host. On the menu: *plov* – fatty mutton with rice and veg, made to an old family recipe from the 1600s. It was hearty fare, designed for surviving the Uzbek winter.

The vodka arrived before the food did, and with it a saucer of small gherkins. Mr Raham must’ve been all out of tequila and lemons. At his

intense insistence, we toasted each other, our health and Uzbekistan before knocking back the shots and taking bites of the pickles.

Mr Raham was born in Bukhara but enjoyed a short stint studying in Moscow, he told us. Home soon beckoned however. “My parents made me return. They were worried I would settle down with a Russian girl and never come back,” he said, between more shots.

“Independence changed Uzbekistan in so many ways. It gave us an identity. In the old days, the medressas were used for storage. They were filled with buses and cars. I always knew this country was special. He who has no history has no future,” added Mr Raham.

The vodka continued to flow, the tiny shot glasses chinking with alarming regularity. Voices started to slur and my head started to spin. I could barely focus on the shelves, which heaved with camel-adorned plates, models of minarets and shiny copper tins.

Five bottles later, it was time to call it a night. I stumbled up and swayed towards the door but something caught my eye in the corner of the room. Hanging on the wall was a red *suzani* rug, embroidered with the most wonderful and intricate patterns. I studied it, hoping a face of timeless beauty would reveal itself but there was not a bushy monobrow to be seen. 📷

Nick Boulous won Travel Writer of the Year and Travel Feature of the Year at this year’s British Travel Press Awards for his contributions to *Wanderlust*. *Congratulations, Nick!*

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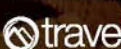
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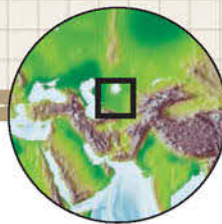
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Uzbekistan Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 28.6 million
Language: Uzbek, Russian, Tajik
Time: GMT+5
International dialling code: +998
Visas: Required by UK nationals. Must be obtained prior to arrival: see uzbekembassy.org.
Money: Uzbek som (UZS), currently around UZS3,500 to the UK£. ATMs are scarce in rural areas.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Summer** Swelteringly hot, temperatures up to 40°C
 ■ **Autumn & spring** Best times to visit; mild and pleasant
 ■ **Winter** Heavy snowfall; low temperatures (often -8°C in December)

✚ **Health & safety**
 No required vaccinations or major health risks. **Malaria prevention** is advisable if travelling to southern Uzbekistan in summer. **Drink bottled/purified water**; avoid foods that may have been washed in tap water.

Further reading & information

Uzbekistan (Bradt, 2013), packed with detail and historical background
Central Asia (Lonely Planet, 2010)
The Great Game (John Murray, 2006) by Peter Hopkirk, a fascinating account of the tactics used between warring Britain and Russia for almost a century
www.uzbektourism.uz
 The official site, but only in Uzbek at the moment

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/143 for links to more content

ARCHIVE ARTICLES

- ◆ How to remember the 'Stans – online
- ◆ Jewels in the dust – issue 41

PLANNING GUIDES

- ◆ Uzbekistan guide

THE TRIP

The author travelled with **Cox & Kings** (0845 154 8941, coxandkings.co.uk), which offers a 12-day *Heart of Central Asia* guided tour of Uzbekistan taking in Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. The trip costs from £1,675, including return flights from London Heathrow, accommodation, transfers and some meals.

✈ Getting there

Uzbekistan Airways (0844 482 1695, uzbekistanairways.uk.com) flies Heathrow-Tashkent daily. Returns cost from around £505; flight time just under seven hours.

🚌 Getting around

Uzbekistan Airways has a **domestic network** offering good connections at reasonable prices. A Tashkent-Bukhara flight costs from £40 one-way.

Reliable train services connect most cities (uzrailpass.uz). Tashkent-Bukhara takes approximately 6.5 hours and costs around UZS62,000 (£18) first class, UZS40,000 (£12) second class.

£ Cost of travel

Uzbekistan is **not expensive**. It's possible to stay at a decent hotel for around £40 a night. A main course in a good restaurant costs around £5; a plate of **plov**, the national dish, costs from £2.

🛏 Accommodation

The lavish **Tashkent Palace** (lottedcityhoteltashkent.com), located opposite the Navoi Opera House, is one of the capital's best hotels. Doubles from US\$180 (£112)

The **Grand Samarkand Hotel** (grand-samarkand.com) has free Wi-Fi and air-con; there are also chatty parrots in the lobby. Doubles from US\$120 (£75).

Family-run **Amelia Boutique Hotel** (hotellamelia.com) in Bukhara has ten rooms, housed in a 19th-century Jewish merchants' house. Doubles from US\$65 (£40).

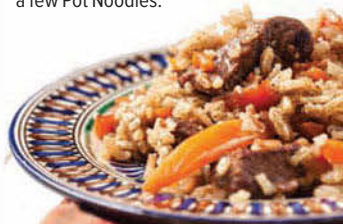
The **Malika Hotel** (malika-khiva.com) in Khiva is just outside the Ichan Qala. Doubles from US\$55 (£34).

🍴 Food & drink

Uzbekistan is not a culinary destination. **Plov** (below), a dish of fatty mutton served with pilau rice and vegetables, is a national institution. Try it at the **Central Asian Plov Centre** (11ftihor St, Tashkent), where it's cooked in outdoor cauldrons.

Shashlik (marinated lamb kebabs) is also popular.

Vegetarians may struggle; pack a few Pot Noodles.



UZBEKISTAN HIGHLIGHTS

1 Tashkent The country's modern capital, with strong Soviet influences and impressive public squares.

2 Ugam-Chatkal National Park Discover hundreds of species of plants and animals, including white-claw bears and golden eagles, in the country's largest protected wilderness.

3 Samarkand Marvel at the most extraordinary architecture in all of Central Asia, including the Registan Mosque, the Shakh-i-Zinda compound (above) and Ulugh-Beg's Observatory.

4 Bukhara Follow in the footsteps of Genghis Khan, who conquered Bukhara in 1220, to explore the city that boasts more than 300 mosques.

5 Nurata Surrounded by mountains, Nurata is home to holy springs and a fort built by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC.

6 Khiva Allegedly first founded by the son of Noah, this ancient walled city became a Silk Road trading post; its old centre is almost perfectly preserved.

NEED TO KNOW

The US dollar is the easiest currency to exchange in Uzbekistan. Don't change too much at once – you'll be carrying a lot of notes!



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*Calls cost 10p per minute plus network extras. Photographs courtesy of Paul Goldstein and also Curtis Welsh, Ruth John and David Lazar, Finalists in the Wanderlust Travel Photo of the Year competition. Information correct at time of going to press.

FROM THE ROAD

Letters, tips, photos & exploits from you, our endlessly adventurous readers

When the conversation turns to crime and punishment, I am always pleased to be able to say that the

only prison cell I have ever seen the inside of is Nelson Mandela's. He wasn't there at the time, of course, and I wouldn't have been in South Africa if he had been. Robben Island, off the Cape coast, is where the late president spent 18 of his 27 years of incarceration as an unwilling guest of the apartheid regime. Now it is a museum and national monument to the struggle against white minority rule, and I travelled there by ferry from the Cape Town waterfront in December 2003 – almost exactly ten years to the day before his death.

For some reason I always find small islands appealing places and Robben Island was no exception. Given its past, I felt slightly uncomfortable about this, until I discovered that my own first impression coincided with Nelson Mandela's. In his autobiography, *Long Walk To Freedom*, he wrote: 'Green and beautiful, it looked at first more like a resort than a prison.' But behind the walls were cells not hotel rooms and the bars on the windows were to keep people in, not out.

I joined a tour conducted by former inmates, who told stories of their lives under apartheid and during imprisonment. Their reminiscences included admissions of direct personal involvement in acts of what their white rulers defined as terrorism. One of the guides went so far as to salute the last white president, FW de Klerk, for dismantling the apartheid system – despite the fact that it should never have been created in the first place.

■ Your Story

An afternoon on Robben Island

myWanderlust member

David Ross recalls his

brief visit to the isle
where Nelson Mandela
was forced to spend
18 years



The cell once occupied by Prisoner 466/64 was a much-photographed sight. Although my only points of comparison were the cells I'd seen on TV police dramas, I was struck by how cramped and uncomfortable it looked, with only the bare floor to sleep on and virtually no space to move around. There was no running water; toilet arrangements consisted of what we know in the UK as 'slopping out'.

In what had been the prisoners' canteen, the menu board still showed that white detainees had been better fed than the black inmates. In the outdoor courtyard, grapevines planted by the prisoners in the 1960s still grew. On the other side of the island, we saw the lime quarries where the prisoners spent their days toiling in the hot sun, while surreptitiously organising resistance to the authorities and planning for the future.

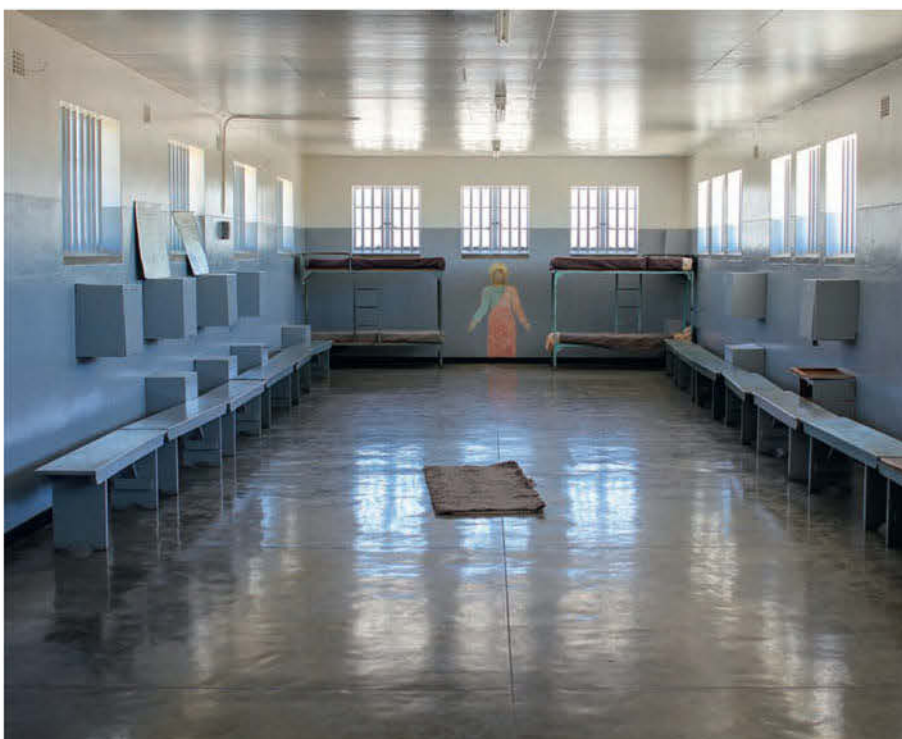
Among the trees and dense brush, which covered much of the ground, springboks and kudus roamed freely – just as they had done when the man who would later become President of South Africa had been behind bars here. The views of Cape Town and Table Mountain from these outdoor areas must have rubbed salt into the wounds of the internees, who could only look across Table Bay at one of the most beautiful spectacles of their country.

Listening now to the ubiquitous tributes to this seemingly universally revered world statesman, it can be hard to believe that they are describing the man once branded a terrorist, whose home for 18 years was that tiny cell on Robben Island.

Amazing travel experience? Post it for a chance to win: wanderlust.co.uk/mywanderlust



Prison paradise
Mandela said Robben Island looked 'like a resort' when he first arrived; the reality of life in the prison was far from it



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LETTERS

Your mail, missives and messages – from marvelling at the Mass Games in North Korea to mulling over if travel is getting better...

Travel changes

Last issue's Big Debate ('Has travel got better or worse over the past 20 years?') was an interesting discussion. Politics has had a major impact (good and bad) on travel: Eastern Europe has opened up; most of Europe's internal borders have disappeared; global terrorism has led to many security measures; more Chinese and Indians are travelling; measures to combat global warming are leading to more expensive travel again.

Everything is always changing. So I suppose we can continue to look forward to more changes over the next 20 years too.

Steve48, via myWanderlust

We ran a poll on this online: 65.5% of you reckon travel is better now than 20 years ago – Ed.

Africa advice

As a resident of Botswana, I read with interest your recent article on the country [November 2013 issue] – the author certainly visited an interesting area.

It is good to see that some of the San are now able to make a living by sharing their traditions with tourists. Personally, I find no reason why tourists should not undertake a trip like the one enjoyed by the author. I also notice that, for part of his trip, he stayed in the excellent upmarket Camp Kalahari. However, many such camps are run by expatriates or foreign companies and the benefits might not always trickle down to the local people.

To encourage citizens to have a greater stake in tourism, the

government has encouraged local communities to set up Community Trusts in tourist areas. One such trust – the Gaing-O Community Trust, based at Mmathumo village – runs a campsite at Kubu Island, which was visited by the author.

Another nearby trust runs the Nata Bird Sanctuary, located on the northern edge of the Makgadikgadi Pans – this is the best place to view the flamingoes during the times when the Nata River floods the northern part of Sowa Pan [one of the two main pans that make up the Makgadikgadi Pans]. Profits from the sanctuary are used to fund the development of four local villages.

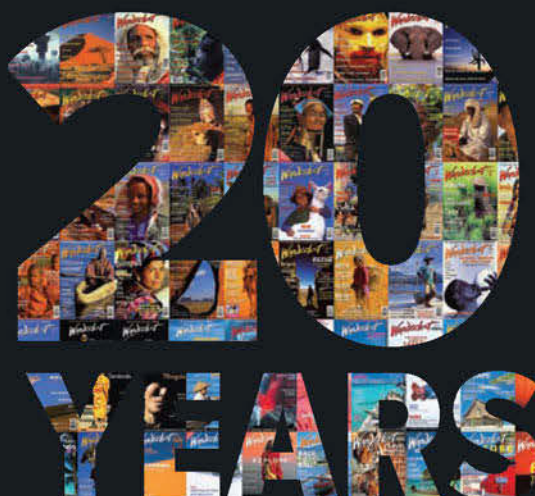
Grahame McLeod, by email

★ STAR LETTER ★ Making up for lost 'lust time!

Congrats on your 20 year anniversary [Dec 13/Jan 14 issue]! Twenty years ago I was visiting Canada: baseball games, paddling in the Ontario lakes and catching pike, drive-in movies, eating BeaverTails [we think Sam means the Canadian fried dough pastry snack – Ed], water fights, making dreamcatchers, getting bitten by a rabbit – memories, memories!

I didn't discover *Wanderlust* (the magazine, that is) for another eight years – what a lot I must have missed!
sam_j_young, myWanderlust

CELEBRATING



IN TRAVEL

Photo favour?

I'm constantly staggered by the quality of the photographs from *Wanderlust* subscribers. Many of us who travel are aspiring photographers, and I'm sure we don't all carry monster DSLRs.

Would it not be possible to append a simple key to each photo, which states the type of camera and the settings used? It would encourage those with point-and-shoots, as well as those who use more sophisticated equipment, to submit pictures to you if they knew that not everyone who gets published is a pro! I believe at least 50% of your readers would be interested in knowing (and learning) more about photography.

Simon Gregory, by email

WIN WANDERLUST GOODIES

Each issue, our winning contribution wins a haul of *Wanderlust* gear.

This time round, congratulations to Sam – and here's to another 20 years!



■ Experiences

JUST BACK
FROM...

North Korea
Tricia Whitley
took nine days
to explore the
little-known country – or
at least, the parts she was
allowed to go to...

The highlights: The Mass Games, called the Arirang: 30,000 adults and children involved in a 90-minute spectacular of music, dancing, gymnastics and colour cards. It was truly the best performance in the world.

Must see: The Kumsusan Memorial Palace, the DMZ, Mt Paekdu, Pyongyang Metro and the Funfair.

Top tip: Do not take any books or magazines that portray North

Korea in a negative light; no religious materials are allowed either. Always speak well of your native country but don't brag.

Cautionary tale: Never go anywhere on your own. This is the most controlled country in the world and you are never a free spirit here. Police are everywhere – the force is a million or more strong! Take pictures of your home and family as the minders will ask many questions, but do not expect any answers to *your* questions – the response is always 'I'm not sure, I don't know'. My minder did not even know their leader had a child.

I wish I'd known... That you have the room you stay in at your first hotel for your entire stay, even if you drive to another part of the country or even fly off for an overnight trip. I would have left my backpack there.

This month you
have mostly been...

Over in the USA with three friends to spend New Year in Las Vegas! My first trip to America, so a totally new experience.

Carmen13



Overlanding from Cape Town to Victoria Falls!

Yvonne Booth



Checking out North America: I visited Canada and Alaska this December. **@MimiAdventures**



In Morocco this month for a spot of wild camping and bike-packing. **FarawayVisions**



To Iceland, in search of the northern lights!

Megan McMurran Lajara



Exploring Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. After a day and half of safari drives in Ranthambore

National Park, we spotted a male tiger. **springer**



Dreaming about the next trip: Bhutan, a place I've wanted to visit for ages, and is in your top 20 travel experiences... aaahhhhhhhhhh!

@leestewart



Back from the cold for me... visited Estonia, Lithuania and Warsaw for a couple of weeks. **mattyboy876**



Here in Stuttgart for the World Beard and Moustache Championship. **Tanya Baldwin**



Just back from a long weekend in New York! Thanksgiving Day parade was a fun American spectacle. **satkinson**

PHOTO OF
THE MONTH

Lights, camera, magic!

By Matthew Calvocoressi

"When the captain mentioned the temperature on the ground was -29°C we honestly thought he was making a mistake. We landed in Kiruna, northern Sweden, and headed to Abisko, where we spent the next three nights. It was a lifetime wish to see the aurora borealis so we had picked the location and timing carefully. The first night was cloudy so no luck; on the second night, the lights came out to play. A magical dance display mesmerised us for a couple of hours. This photo was taken from a hilltop overlooking Abisko National Park. With frozen toes, fingers and nose we gazed in amazement!"



TALK TO US: Online at www.wanderlust.co.uk/mywanderlust. **Email** letters & photos to fromtheroad@wanderlust.co.uk. **Mail** Wanderlust, 1 Leworth Place, Windsor SL4 1EB. **Twitter** @wanderlustmag. **Facebook** www.facebook.com/wanderlusttravelmagazine

A photograph of the Arenal volcano, showing its steep, ash-covered slopes and a lush green forest at its base. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue with a few wispy white clouds. The volcano's peak is visible on the right side of the frame, and a small plume of white smoke or steam is seen rising from the top right corner.

Letting off steam
Still active, still
remarkable – the
Arenal volcano looms
over Lake Arenal

G R E E N

Tiny Costa Rica is a biodiversity
colossus. And thanks to some
innovative and sensitive ecolodges,
you can see the country's wildest
places in fine, sustainable style

WORDS SARAH GILBERT

G I A N T

My 5am alarm call was the sonorous roar of howler monkeys staking out their territory. As I woke with a start at Lapa Rios Ecolodge, I saw squabbling squirrel monkeys swing past my terrace, foraging for insects. Giant iguanas sunned themselves on tree trunks and

unwieldy looking toucans perched on branches like strange fruit. A pair of vociferous scarlet macaws preened each other, while a Golfo Dulce poison dart frog – barely larger than a thumbnail – hopped out of my path. Spider monkeys put on a show of aerial gymnastics around the swimming pool. And that was all before I'd had breakfast.

Welcome to Costa Rica, a wildlife wonderland. Millions of years ago, the country became part of a land bridge connecting the North and South American continents, allowing their flora and fauna to mix – no wonder the Spanish conquistadors christened it the Rich Coast.

Today the country is home to an estimated 6% of the world's plant and animal species. The sheer diversity of its exotic flora and fauna is staggering: around 850 species of birds, 600 species of butterflies and almost 240 types of mammals, including humpback whales, dolphins, sea turtles and four species of monkey – all in an area around two-thirds the size of Scotland.

But it hasn't all been plain sailing. In 1940, 75% of the country was forested but by 1987, this had dropped to 21%. Fortunately the forward-thinking government realised it needed to protect the country's greatest asset and it's back up to 52%. Now Central

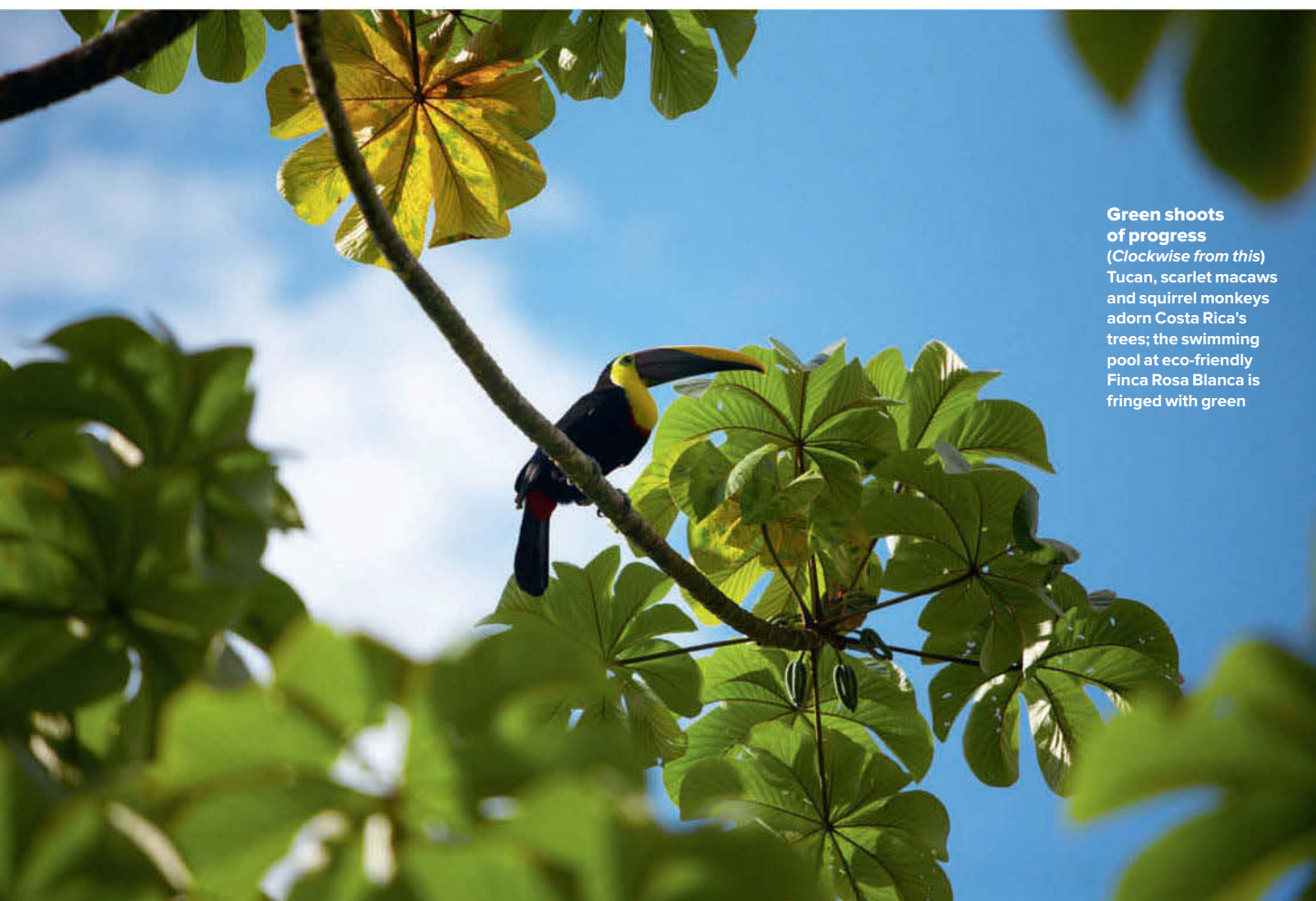
America's number one ecotourism destination, 27% of Costa Rica's landmass is devoted to national parks and reserves, encompassing around 160 protected areas, from dense rainforests to mist-wreathed cloud forests, marine environments and still-smoking volcanoes. And Ticos and expats alike are delighted to share their *pura vida* – pure life – with you.

Five-star sustainability

Hailing from California, Teri and Glenn Jampol rescued a piece of land in the fertile Central Valley from a Motocross dealership. It was 1985 and they had no sustainable models to follow; it was, in their words, "trial and a lot of error".

But their hard work paid off with the creation of Finca Rosa Blanca, a carbon-neutral organic coffee farm, private nature reserve and art-filled boutique hotel, surrounded by a modern-day tropical Eden. Here, everything is super-sized, from the butterflies – giant blue morphos – to the foliage – enormous swiss-cheese plants, elephant ears as big as umbrellas, luxuriant ferns, lofty palms festooned with creepers and tree branches laden with bromeliads.

In the late 1980s, tourism was growing at a rapid rate and eco-resorts were sprouting up faster than you could say 'alfalfa'. With even car hire firms jumping on the eco bandwagon, it was difficult to tell if you were being greenwashed. Thankfully there is a way to be sure. The Government-run CST (Certification for Sustainable Tourism) is a programme that hotels voluntarily join and are awarded one to five leaves, based on several core principles, including how they minimise their impact on the environment, sponsorship of projects involving the local community and their contribution to increasing environmental knowledge within that community. ►



Green shoots of progress

(Clockwise from this) Toucan, scarlet macaws and squirrel monkeys adorn Costa Rica's trees; the swimming pool at eco-friendly Finca Rosa Blanca is fringed with green



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The eyes have it
A kinkajou foraging in the treetops at night

‘Suddenly Roy shone his torch into a tree, highlighting the golden eyes of a kinkajou, an intriguing cross between a monkey and a small bear’

◀ It's something Glenn has been involved in since its inception and in 2003, Finca Rosa Blanca became the first hotel to gain the maximum five leaves. One of its key innovations is using the abundance of sunshine to fuel its electricity and pump and heat its water. “It's not perfect, but sustainability in Costa Rica is light years ahead of other, more developed countries,” Glenn told me.

Along with its environmental projects, Finca Rosa Blanca aims to introduce guests to the country's often overlooked culture and cuisine, with visits to cheese-makers, vanilla and cacao farms, and a traditional *trapiche* (sugar mill). The food it serves is as organic as possible, and if it's not plucked from their own greenhouse it's locally sourced. Its chickens provide the eggs for breakfast, which are served with *gallo pinto* (rice and beans), piquant *pico de gallo salsa* and freshly made corn tortillas, all washed down with its own delicious organic coffee.

I visited the local market with the chef, where stalls were piled high with tropical fruits – guava, jocote, soursop – and giant tubers, before heading back to the kitchen and learning to conjure up a Caribbean-style ceviche with coconut milk and Panamanian peppers, and tasty tamarind and coffee chicken.

Glorious green

A few hours north of the Central Valley, sitting high on the country's mountainous spine and reached by a bone-jangling unpaved road, lies Monteverde. It was established by a small group of American

Quakers in the 1950s, pacifists who came to Costa Rica to evade Korean War conscription. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve sits at the meeting point of the Continental Divide, where moist air from the Caribbean meets dry air from the Pacific, creating a hotbed of biodiversity.

On a clear day, you can see all the way to the Pacific from the terrace at Hotel Belmar, my base in Monteverde. Opened in 1985, it's been committed to environmental and social responsibility from the start and has its own sustainability department dedicated to implementing programmes from reforestation to a biodigester that cleans wastewater.

On my first night there, I headed out with guide Roy. Squelching along a muddy forest trail I peered into the enveloping darkness, the air thick with the scent of damp vegetation. The trees parted to let a shaft of moonlight through, when suddenly Roy shone his torch into a tree, highlighting the golden eyes of a kinkajou, an intriguing cross between a monkey and a small bear. He pointed out a somnolent three-toed sloth lying supine on its twig bed and, far more deadily, a venomous side-striped palm pit viper.

Early the next morning I set off to explore Curi-Cancha, a cattle ranch turned private reserve, with trails winding through primary, secondary and open forest. Bathed in bright sunlight, the forest took on an entirely different aspect.

Roy was on high alert for the elusive quetzal, described by a twitcher friend as one of the Holy Grails of birding. He found ►



A flutter of wildlife
(clockwise from this)
Green violet-ear hummingbird can reach speeds of 145kmph; a spider monkey in the trees at Lapa Rios; one of the 1,300 species of orchid found in the country; the toxin from poison dart frogs were used to tip Amerindian darts; more lush Costa greenery, a result of its unique continent-bridging position



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‘We stopped to look at giant trees trapped in the ruthless embrace of a strangler fig, miniature orchids, and a mass of resting daddy longlegs that hung from a trunk like a patch of black hair.’



Guilt-free luxury?
The five-star view from the extremely green Arenas del Mar hotel

◀ not one, but two: young males with their pseudo-mohawks and long tail feathers, resplendent in their brilliant crimson and blue-green plumage.

Through the telescope, I spied on an iridescent green violet-ear hummingbird singing to attract a female, his clear, sweet notes echoing for miles through the forest. Easier to spot, evocatively named hummingbirds – violet sabrewings, green-crowned brilliants, coppery-headed emeralds – hovered excitedly around the sugar-water feeders, and there was an audible buzz from their tiny wings as they beat at around 70 times a second.

But it wasn't just about birds. We stopped to look at giant trees trapped in the ruthless embrace of a strangler fig, miniature orchids, the tracks of an armadillo and a mass of resting daddy longlegs that hung from a trunk like a patch of black hair. As we left, the forest became enveloped in atmospheric swirls of mist.

Life's a beach

At the turn of the 20th century, the government gave what became the all-powerful United Fruit Company 3,200 sq km of land on the Central Pacific Coast, in return for helping to build a railway line. The resulting banana plantations – now filled with lines of African palms, harvested for oil – broke up the biological corridor that linked Arenal Volcano, Monteverde and the south Pacific coast, creating a biological island. In 1972 this became the Manuel Antonio National Park, the country's smallest and one of its most popular. Fronted by pristine beaches and backed by verdant rainforest, it's one of the easiest places to spot wildlife.

A black spiny-tailed iguana greeted me at the entrance. Then, along the Perezoso (Sloth) Trail, my sharp-eyed guide spotted a cyanide-oozing millipede that smelt faintly of almonds, glass frog eggs attached to the underside of a leaf and a perfectly camouflaged Jesus Christ lizard – so called because they can walk on water – basking on a log. ►

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Costa Rica

When you're travelling in Costa Rica, binoculars should be top of your packing list. Due to the huge number of different habitats, Costa Rica has a rich diversity of wildlife with elusive jaguars roaming the forests and colourful birds soaring majestically over head. Nature lovers may spot toucans, howler monkeys, brightly coloured poison dart frogs, humpback whales, dolphins and endangered turtles all within a short adventure to Costa Rica.



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‘With not another soul in sight I waded into the surf, buffeted by the gentle swells and felt like the ocean was mine alone.’

◀ I didn't need him to point out a boisterous posse of squirrel monkeys as they scampered from tree to tree grabbing at anything interesting they could find. Nor the bad boy white-faced capuchin monkey that bared its fangs at us strange creatures staring up at it. And certainly not the crowd that had gathered around the three-toed sloth, slowly inching its way down a tree for its weekly toilet trip.

I strolled back from the park along Espadilla Beach, a glorious sweep of dark volcanic sand, where families played football, salsa blasted from radios and novice surfers wavered unsteadily on their boards before crashing into the waves. I was headed for Arenas del Mar Beachfront and Rainforest Resort, which is set on a hillside overlooking the sea. The resort, opened in 2008 and built on land owned by Glenn Jampol of Finca Rosa Blanca, started as an experiment in eco-luxury: could a new five-star hotel also be a five-leaf hotel?

Well, it turns out it can. Among Arenas del Mar's other initiatives, its convincing thatched roofs are actually made from recycled plastic rather than the endangered *suita* palm, there are no chemicals in the pool (which makes it safe for birds to drink) and its reforestation programme has created an ecological corridor, meaning that the monkeys that inhabit the national park live here too.

Just before sunset, I wandered down to the hotel's private beach. A brown pelican dived from the cobalt-blue sky in search of fish but surfaced empty beaked. With not another soul in sight I waded into the surf, buffeted by the gentle swells and felt like the ocean was mine alone.

Connecting with nature

Flying south, I saw the regimented African palms give way to natural forest that looked like clumps of giant broccoli. I was headed for the Osa Peninsula, on the country's wild south-west Pacific coast, an area of rainforest, rivers and mangroves, ringed by unspoiled beaches. It's where, in the 1990s, former US Peace Corps workers John and Karen Lewis, decided to turn a cattle ranch into an ambitious conservation project and private reserve.

The result was Lapa Rios. Built to blend into the landscape, its 16 bungalows, camouflaged by forest, overlook a vast expanse of



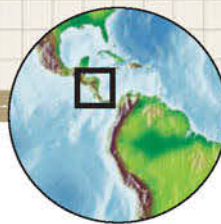
Open planning
The Lapa Rios bungalows opt for natural air-con

virtually deserted beach. There's no air conditioning but the walls are open to allow the Pacific breeze to filter through. There's no TV either, just the sound of the crashing surf. The alfresco shower was perfect after a day exploring, while the alfresco hammock was perfect for stargazing.

There was almost no need to leave the lodge, as everything dropped by. And you could feast on home-grown, organic produce and simply lounge by the pool, safe in the knowledge that your hedonism was being offset by the lodge's environmental projects. Organic waste from the restaurant goes to feed some very contented-looking pigs; in turn, their waste becomes methane gas, which cooks the staff meals. The lodge has planted 2,000 native trees; you can even plant your own.

But I had to explore the steamy rainforest, sweltering in long trousers and rubber boots as I cautiously navigated the slippery root-laced trails. On a night walk, we came across a pair of sleeping toucans nuzzled together on a high branch, a primary coloured red-eyed tree frog and a coiled (but thankfully docile) fer-de-lance snake, just off the path. On the beach, I watched enthralled as a spider monkey grabbed a coconut and bashed it against a branch until it released its sweet juice. That night I was lulled to sleep by the waves, the chirp of geckos and the trill of frogs, and woke to a chorus of unidentified chirrup, whoops and caws.

There's no internet, which might be your idea of hell, but being so connected to nature and disconnected to the outside world, even for a short time, seemed rather heavenly to me. I'd found my *pura vida*. 🌿



Costa Rica Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: San José
Population: 4.7 million
Language: Spanish
Time: GMT-6
International dialling code: +506
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Colón (CRC/₡) currently around ₡785 to the UK£. US dollars are accepted everywhere and ATMs in major towns usually dispense both colones and dollars. Credit and debit cards are widely accepted.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ Dry, summer (*verano*) season (although you should still expect a fair bit of rain); busiest time
 ■ More rain and fewer visitors
 ■ The winter (*invierno*) rainfall peaks; some rural roads can become impassable

Health & safety

Recommended immunisations include hepatitis A, tetanus and diphtheria. There's a risk of malaria in the Limón region on the Caribbean coast; consult your doctor. Water is generally safe to drink. Violent crime against travellers is rare, though take the obvious precautions.

You can take out comprehensive travel insurance at www.wanderlustinsurance.co.uk

Further reading & information

Costa Rica (Lonely Planet, 2012)
Costa Rica (Rough Guide, 2011)
www.visitcostarica.com – official tourist board site
www.lata.org – the Latin American Travel Association

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/143 for links to more content

ARCHIVE ARTICLES

- ◆ **Crossing Costa Rica** – issue 127
 - ◆ **Costa Rica: offbeat ecolodges** – online
 - ◆ **The Costa Rica conundrum** – issue 85
- #### PLANNING GUIDES
- ◆ **Costa Rica guide**

THE TRIP

The author travelled with **Rainbow Tours** (020 7666 1260, rainbowtours.co.uk) on a tailor-made ten-night **Costa Rica Sustainable Wildlife** tour.

This costs £3,290pp, including flights, transfers, internal flights, some activities and accommodation on a B&B basis at the following 'Five Leaf' rated properties: Grano de Oro in San José; Arenal Springs at Arenal Volcano; Hotel Belmar in Monteverde; Arenas del Mar in Manuel Antonio National Park; Lapa Rios (full-board) on the Osa Peninsula; and Finca Rosa Blanca in the Central Valley.

Getting there

There are no direct UK-Costa Rica flights. **American Airlines** (0844 499 7300, aa.com) flies London-San José via US hubs; **Iberia** (0870 609 0500, iberia.com) and **BA** (0844 493 0787, britishairways.com) fly via Madrid. Flight time is from around 14 hours; return fares start from £500.

Getting around

Airlines including **Sansa Regional** (flightsansa.com) and **Nature Air** (natureair.com) offer domestic flights in Costa Rica.

Buses are generally comfortable and efficient but distances can be long. If you hire a car you will usually need a 4WD.

Cost of travel

Costa Rica is the fourth most expensive country in Latin America but **has something to suit all budgets**. You can get by on US\$40 a day using hostels and buses; to upgrade accommodation and dining and factor in domestic flights, allow US\$50-100.

Accommodation

Hotels in the **CST programme** (Certification for Sustainable Tourism; www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/en) are graded one to five leaves for their sustainability practices, Five Leaf being the highest.

Food & drink

Classic dishes include **gallo pinto** (rice and beans) and **casado** (gallo pinto with fried plantains, salad and fish or meat) as well as fish, usually **corvina** (sea bass).

Try exotic local fruit juices, such as **maracuya** (passion fruit), **guanabana** (soursop) and **carambola** (star fruit).

Imperial is the most popular local beer. **Guaro** is the national spirit, made from sugar cane.

Head in the clouds
 It's easy to lose yourself – or just get lost – in Costa Rica's dense fog forests



COSTA RICA HIGHLIGHTS

1 Osa Peninsula A remote, unspoiled corner, cloaked in wild jungle, ringed by deserted beaches and riddled with fascinating creatures; home to Corcovado National Park.

2 Monteverde Cloud Forest Pristine forest dripping with atmosphere and abundant in birds – including the resplendent quetzal.

3 Manuel Antonio National Park Rainforest meets beach and wild rocky headland at this compact park, which is filled with wildlife galore, including sloths and rare squirrel monkeys.

4 Arenal Volcano A picture-perfect active cone, known to spit and spurt ash and lava on a relatively regular basis (though currently experiencing a quieter spell). The area boasts beautiful trails and hot springs too.

5 Central Valley This volcano-flanked plateau is Costa Rica's most populous region – it's where you'll find capital San José. There are rivers to raft, craters to climb and misty coffee plantations to admire.

NEED TO KNOW

There is a departure tax of US\$29 – payable in colones, US dollars, a mix of both, or by credit/debit card when you leave the country.



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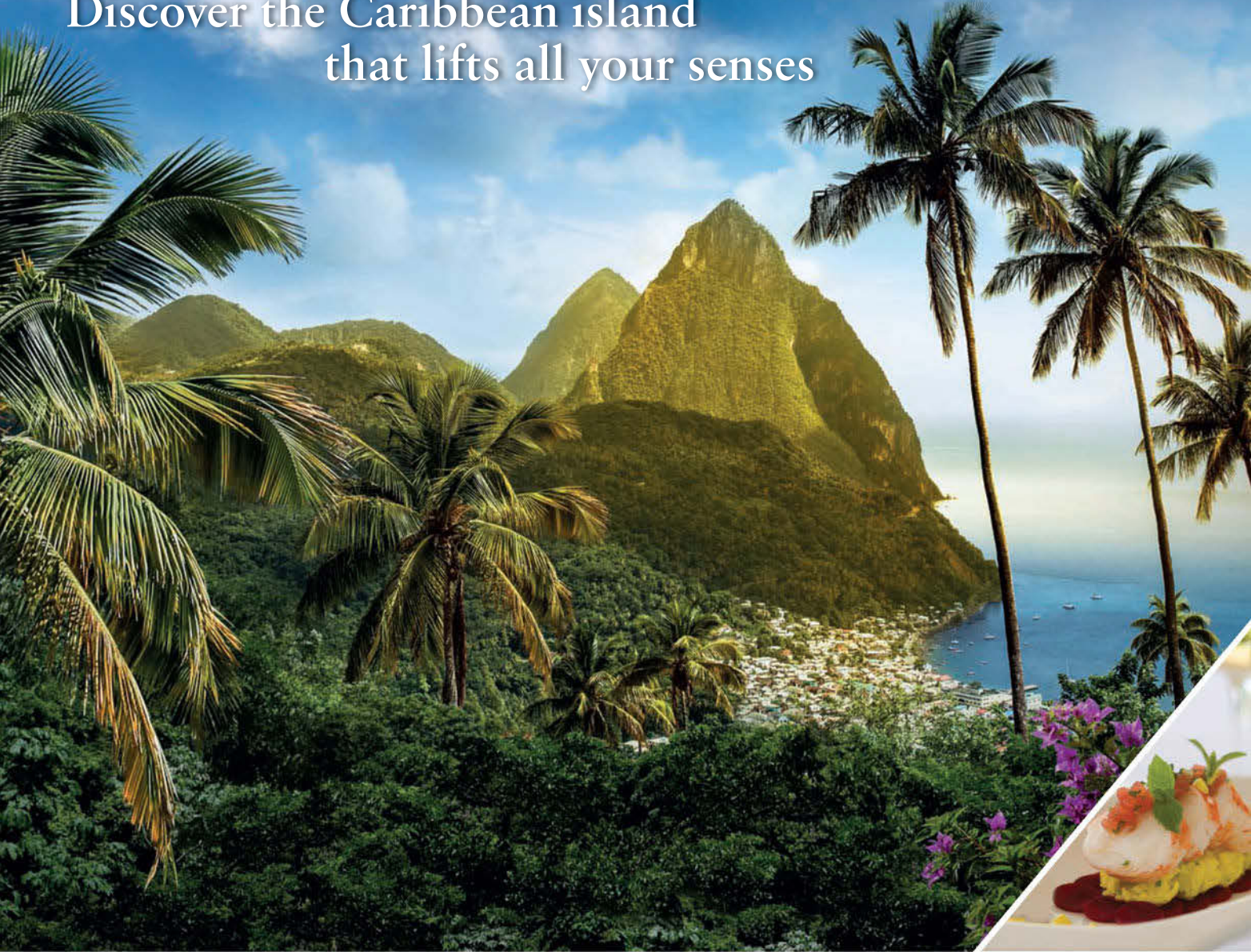
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WHO: Bamboo Travel (020 7720

9285, www.bambootravel.co.uk)

WHEN: Flexible departures Mar-May & Sept-Nov 2014

HOW LONG: 19 nights

HOW MUCH: From £3,895 (incl flights)

CHATHAM ISLANDS

Explore offbeat New Zealand

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If hiking across a seriously remote wildlife and fossil-filled wilderness is your idea of perfection you'll want to lace up

for the *Chatham Islands Adventure* from Discover The World. Guided walks on this largely uninhabited archipelago, 680km south-east of NZ, will offer glimpses of endangered birdlife (such as the Chatham Island black robin), intriguing geology and deserted beaches. Also, soak up unique culture at Te Kopinga, a community centre for the descendants of the Moriori people – the island's first inhabitants.

WHO: Discover the World (01737 218802,

www.discover-the-world.co.uk)

WHEN: Flexible departures, Sept 2014-Mar 2015

HOW LONG: Four nights

HOW MUCH: From £1,225 (excl flights)

PERU

Trek another Inca Trail

Dragoman's new *Moon Temple to Sun Temple* community trek (pictured below)

will give hikers an alternative to the much-tramped Inca Trail.

Avoiding the crowds, the five-day route rambles through isolated areas of the Andes, passing small settlements and offering the chance to meet local tribes. It ends with a train trip to Machu Picchu, so you don't

miss out on the super citadel. The hike will be included on most of Dragoman's trips to Peru, including the 12-day *Andes & Amazon* – Cusco-La Paz adventure.

WHO: Dragoman (01728 861133,

www.dragoman.com)

WHEN: Various set departures

HOW LONG: From 11 nights

HOW MUCH: From £555, plus US\$820 local payment (excl flights)

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Somaliland isn't actually a country. But while the world doesn't recognise this self-declared state, its limbo position allowed it to escape the turmoil in neighbouring Somalia. The result? A safer enclave where few travellers venture. Undiscovered Destinations' *Somaliland Uncovered* trip lifts the lid, journeying from the bustling markets of capital Hargeisa to the nomadic communities of Baligubadle, the prehistoric rock-art site of Las Geel and the colonial coastal city of Berbera, via 16th-century ruins and spectacular mountain scenery.

WHO: Undiscovered Destinations (0191 296

2674, www.undiscovered-destinations.com)

WHEN: 22 Nov 2014 **HOW LONG:** Seven nights

HOW MUCH: From £1,499 (excl flights)





NORTH KOREA Go further than ever before

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It's hard to believe everything you read about North Korea, whether it's the country's purported discovery of unicorn remains or stories of Kim Jong-il's golfing prowess (38 under par on his first round...). Discover the truth about this reclusive nation on Regent Holidays' *Pioneering North Korea* guided tour. Its scope is unprecedented, combining must-sees such as Mt Paekdu (pictured) with rarely (or never) visited areas

– including a newly opened city on the Chinese border – that Regent has had to charter a private plane in order to reach.

WHO: Regent Holidays
(020 7666 1244,
www.regent-holidays.co.uk)
WHEN: 25 Aug 2014
HOW LONG: 16 days
HOW MUCH: From £3,125
(excl UK-Beijing flights)

TANZANIA

Climb around Kili

£50
OFF

Avoid the usual migration of Kili-hikers by joining World Expeditions' *Remote Kilimanjaro – The Northern Circuit* trip. Spread over a generous nine days (great for acclimatisation, and increasing your chance of success), this trek through rainforest, alpine desert and eerie moonscapes starts from the mountain's little-visited western side, traverses the northern slopes, summits from the east and descends via the south – almost a full circumnavigation of the 5,895m behemoth.

WHO: World Expeditions (0800 0744 135,
www.worldexpeditions.co.uk)
WHEN: Every Monday, Jun-Oct 2014 & Dec
2014-Feb 2015 **HOW LONG:** Ten nights
HOW MUCH: From £2,095pp (excl flights)

IRAN & IRAQ

Bust modern borders

The word 'Persia' remains one of the most evocative in travel, even if it no longer exists on a map. Wild Frontiers' *From Iran to Iraq (Recce Tour)* aims to transcend current boundaries by combining western Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, and by visiting ancient Persian sights and tracing common cultural threads in this most fractured region.

Winding from Tehran to Erbil, this exploratory trip delves into the Zagros Mountains, where Kurdish hospitality is almost overwhelming and surprises lay down every little-trodden road. A proper adventure.

WHO: Wild Frontiers Adventure Travel
(020 77363968, www.wildfrontierstravel.com)
WHEN: 20 Sep 2014 **HOW LONG:** 14 nights
HOW MUCH: £3,895 (incl flights)

SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE

Become one with nature

Few go to São Tomé & Príncipe; few even know where it is. But this tiny island nation, 225km west of Gabon, is ripe for exploration reckons Rainbow Tours, which has launched a *São Tomé & Príncipe* trip. Príncipe is a bit of an African Eden, declared a UNESCO-Biosphere Reserve due to its rich wildlife: nesting turtles, migrating humpbacks and a wealth of reptiles and birds. Based at the eco-lovely Bom Bom Resort, you can mix animal encounters with palm-fringed beaches, Portuguese-Creole cuisine and off-grid living.

WHO: Rainbow Tours (020 7666 1250,
www.rainbowtours.co.uk)
WHEN: Flexible departures
HOW LONG: Seven nights
HOW MUCH: From £2,195 (incl flights) ►

CULTURE SEEKERS

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There are 7,000-plus islands in the Philippines archipelago, which makes deciding where to go tricky. Luckily Travel The Unknown has put together a plum itinerary – the *Hidden Treasures of Luzon* – that pick-n-mixes idyllic beaches, huffing volcanoes, fascinating hilltribes and curious culture. On Luzon you'll combine Banaue's 2,000-year-old rice terraces, eerie hanging coffins, crater walks and weaving lessons, before ending on pretty Ticao Island.

WHO: Travel The Unknown (020 7183 6371, traveltheunknown.com)

WHEN: 25 Feb & 14 May 2014; also available as a tailor-made tour

HOW LONG: 13 nights

HOW MUCH: From £2,195 (excl flights)

UGANDA

Meet the tribe

Head to the edge of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park on Bailey Robinson's *Batwa Pygmies Discovery*. Based at the refurbished Mount Gahinga Lodge, you'll have a rare opportunity to be immersed in the culture of the Batwa – said to be the oldest surviving peoples in Central Africa. Visit the Batwa Cultural Heritage Site, learn how the tribe hunt, survive and use medicinal herbs, and spend nights listening to their stories around the campfire.

WHO: Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, www.baileyrobinson.com)

WHEN: Flexible departures

HOW LONG: Three nights

HOW MUCH: £1,995 (incl flights)

BOLIVIA

Taste a food revolution

HighLives' *Gourmet Tour of Bolivia* trip whisks travellers through a culinary revolution. Since award-winning chef Claus Mayer opened Gustu in La Paz in 2013, the Bolivian food scene has been brought to global attention. This trip journeys from Bolivia's little-known vineyards to the serene salt flats of Uyuni, the quinoa-planted high Andean plains and the bustling markets of La Paz, before finishing with a 15-course tasting extravaganza at Gustu itself. An edible adventure!

WHO: HighLives (020 8144 2629, www.highlives.co.uk)

WHEN: Flexible departures

HOW LONG: Eight days

HOW MUCH: From £3,000 (incl flights)



Gold coast
The reef-top pagoda
in the little-visited
Mon state



EASTERN EUROPE

Sink your teeth into the East

£50 OFF Medieval castles, time-warp towns, the legend of Dracula... an air of mystery pervades Tucan Travel's *Transylvania Tale*, which hops from Budapest to Istanbul, through Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. Using various modes of transport, you'll explore this exotic eastern edge of Europe, visiting ornate Byzantine churches, Ottoman mosques, fortresses from the Dark Ages and grand bazaars. And of course you'll be lured to Braşov's Bran Castle – believed to have been home to Dracula himself.

WHO: Tucan Travel (0800 804 8435, www.tucantravel.com)

WHEN: Monthly departures, Apr-Nov 2014

HOW LONG: 14 nights

HOW MUCH: £1,379 (excl flights)

BURMA

Take a different trail

£50 OFF Head off the beaten Burmese track to travel through the neighbouring,

yet very different, states of Mon and Kayin (Karen) in the country's south-east. All Points East's *Lookin' Lazy at the Sea* tour explores the culture of these colourful regions, including a pilgrimage up Golden Rock, an amble around the historic port of Moulmein and a trip upriver into Karen's dramatic karst scenery. You'll finish among the fishing communities of the Irrawaddy Delta and the beaches of the Bay of Bengal.

WHO: All Points East (023 9225 8859, allpointseast.com)

WHEN: 16 Feb, 2 Nov & 24 Dec 2014

HOW LONG: 13 nights

HOW MUCH: From £2,685 (incl flights)

SOLOMON ISLANDS & PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Sail to secret isles

Feel part high-seas explorer, part honorary guest on Silversea Expeditions' *Remote Cultures of the Coral Sea* trip. This is no regular cruise, sailing between remote Solomon Islands and PNG ports. At every stop you'll find a warm song-and-dance welcome, and locals will guide excursions to breathtaking fjords, pristine reefs and tribal villages. Highlights include Kennedy Island (where JFK was marooned during WW2), snorkelling off Rabaul and watching a traditional Baining fire dance as well as enjoying a luxurious life aboard the 128-guest *Silver Discoverer*, where even the champers is free!

WHO: Silversea Expeditions (0844 579 6712, www.silversea.com/expeditions)

WHEN: 20 Oct 2014

HOW LONG: 14 nights

HOW MUCH: From £6,550 (excl flights) ►

NAMIBIA & ANGOLA

Take the road less travelled

£50 OFF Exodus Travels' *Northern Namibia & Angola* trip is a potent shot of offbeat culture and wildlife. Travel through the two remote regions – where few others go – to meet the local residents. This includes the striking Himba tribe (pictured), with their ochre-dyed hair and elaborate headdresses, as well as the Mucubali, Mucawana and Kimbundu of little-visited Angola. Take safaris through Etosha and Iona National Parks, hike

the dramatic Tunda Vala volcanic fissure, discover colonial Portuguese style in Lubango and pitch your tent in the wilds each night.

WHO: Exodus Travels (0845 863 9601, www.exodustravels.com)

WHEN: 8 Jun, 20 Jul, 10 & 31 Aug, 21 Sept 2014

HOW LONG: 14 days

HOW MUCH: From £3,699 (incl flights)

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◀ **INDONESIA**

Leave the crowds

Escaping the crowds on the world's most-populated island is no easy task, yet that's exactly what G Adventures' *Best of Java* tour promises to do. This guided trip takes you all over the island, from the intense metropolis of Jakarta to the cultural hub of Yogyakarta, its surrounding volcanoes, up mystical Mount Bromo and around the ninth-century temples of Borobudur, before wandering the Dutch colonial streets of Batu. The local guides are passionate about proving there's much more to Indonesia than Bali's famed beaches – though finishing on one provides a fine finale to this adventure, and a well deserved rest too.

WHO: G Adventures (0844 272 2040, www.gadventures.co.uk)

WHEN: Flexible departures

HOW LONG: Nine days

HOW MUCH: from £749 (excl flights)

SCOTLAND

Hike with a hero

Rob Roy MacGregor was Scotland's Robin Hood, a much-loved outlaw who roamed the Highlands in the 18th century, evading the law as he feuded against the man who seized his lands. Sherpa Expeditions' *Rob Roy Way* trip follows the 128km trail that links some of his old haunts and – rather conveniently – some of the area's most spectacular views, overlooking lochs and valleys. Starting in the comely town of Drymen (home to the Clachan Inn, once run by Roy's sister), you'll hike through the Trossachs, climb into the hills, dip to Loch Tay and Aberfeldy and traverse the moors to Pitlochry. Full of untamed forest, grand glens and raging rivers, it's a trek back in time.

WHO: Sherpa Expeditions

(0800 008 7741, www.sherpa-walking-holidays.co.uk)

WHEN: From 1 Apr 2014

HOW LONG: Eight nights

HOW MUCH: From £555 (excl flights)

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**AUSTRALIA**

Venture into the red centre

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February 2014 marks a decade since *The Ghan* railway first chugged cross-country from Darwin to Adelaide. Celebrate this feat of engineering by climbing aboard the iconic train on its Darwin to Alice Spring's leg as part of Audley Travel's *Northern Territory Train Experience*. Explore Darwin and waterfall-filled Litchfield NP before boarding the train and watching the Red Centre (with the MacDonnell Ranges, above) roll past your window. On arrival in Alice Springs, a trip to Uluru will be top priority.

WHO: Audley Travel (01993 838800, www.audleytravel.com)

WHEN: Flexible departures

HOW LONG: Six days

HOW MUCH: £1,850 (excl flights)

BRAZIL

Delve into the Amazon

Gaze at the bulgy-eyed potoo bird, the primeval-looking caiman and myriad other

species on Chameleon Worldwide's *Pure Amazon* trip. This jungle journey goes deep into the rainforest. You'll take a four-night cruise on a intimate riverboat, navigating the Amazon's flooded forests, tracts of black-water and secretive side channels, looking out for creatures. After disembarking, you'll fly further into the jungle, to a floating ecolodge, where you can relax, walk, canoe and spot even more critters.

WHO: Chameleon Worldwide (01962 737647, www.chameleonworldwide.co.uk)

WHEN: Various set departures, Jan-Dec 2014

HOW LONG: Nine nights

HOW MUCH: From £3,290 (incl flights)

LAOS

Reach remote regions

Be a pioneer on Selective Asia's *Backroads of Laos* trip. Making use of new roads linking Khammouane to the country's Central Highlands, this adventure combines key sites such as Luang Prabang and the Plain of Jars with tribal villages and Laos' ▶

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BORNEO & ANGOLA

Take the road less travelled

£50 OFF Retrace the footsteps of Australian and British POWs along the infamous Sandakan Ranau Death March on On The Go Tours' *Borneo & the Ranau Track* tour. Almost 2,000 Allied prisoners died here during WW2; visiting various war memorials and hiking through the wilderness from Bilit to Nalapak brings the past to life. The trip also packs in more of Borneo's best bits: the great apes of Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary, whitewater rafting on the Kiulu River, the vast Gomantong Caves and nights spent surrounded by the sounds of the jungle.
WHO: On The Go Tours (0207 371 1113, www.onthegotours.com)
WHEN: 31 May & 8 Nov 2014
HOW LONG: Eight days
HOW MUCH: From £1,249 (excl flights)



◀ remoter eastern reaches. These include Nam Et National Protected Area, where you can explore on a night safari, floating downriver looking for rare wildlife – deer, otters, loris – by spotlight. You'll also delve into the nearby Vieng Xai Caves, which sheltered thousands of Laotians during the Second Indochina War.
WHO: Selective Asia (01273 670001, www.selectiveasia.com)
WHEN: Flexible departures
HOW LONG: 14 nights
HOW MUCH: From £1,708 (excl flights)

UK-CHINA

Embark on a giant road trip

£50 OFF Thanks to charmless budget airlines it's easy to forget that getting there is supposed to be half the fun. Oasis Overland's *London to Beijing Trans Asia* tour instead takes the traditional road trip to extremes, visiting 17 countries in 17 weeks. Embarking from London by minibus, you'll cross Europe to reach Turkey in time for ANZAC Day. Then it's into the overlanding truck and off along the Silk Road – Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan... The Great Wall of China provides the grandest finish line.
WHO: Oasis Overland (01963 363400, www.oasisoverland.co.uk)
WHEN: 9 Apr 2014 **HOW LONG:** 118 days
HOW MUCH: £4,195, plus US\$2,150 local payment (excl flights)

UK-SINGAPORE

Take a BIG trip

Do something epic in 2014. Sundowners Overland is celebrating its half-century with

a special *50th Anniversary Journey*. Departing from London, you'll cover 17,500km, travelling overland through France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Burma, Thailand and Malaysia, finally finishing in Singapore 55 days later. Lingering in remoter spots, and travelling by local trains where possible, this trip to the other side of the world isn't all about the destinations – it's about who you might meet along the way.

WHO: Sundowners Overland (0208 877 7657, www.sundownersoverland.com)
WHEN: 30 Mar 2014 **HOW LONG:** 54 nights
HOW MUCH: From £9,735 (excl flights)

USA

Conquer America

Around the world in 80 days? It's been done. So how about around the States in 80 days? TrekAmerica's new *The Great 48* roadtrip offers adventurous Ameriphiles the chance to tick-off every continental US state in one go. Party in Vegas, Miami and New York; catch live tunes in Nashville, New Orleans and Memphis; be awed by Yosemite, Yellowstone and Monument Valley; get wet at Niagara and cultured in DC; discover everything from bears and gators to giant sequoia trees and Hollywood stars. Think Phileas Fogg, in finer focus.

WHO: TrekAmerica (0333 999 7951, www.trekamerica.co.uk)
WHEN: 9 May 2014 **HOW LONG:** 80 days
HOW MUCH: £5,699 (excl flights)

CENTRAL AMERICA

Be thrilled in three countries

Thrillseekers will find just what they're looking for on KE Adventure's *From the Pacific to the Caribbean* tour. This wild journey through Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras packs in plenty, from jungle hikes and canopy-walks to surfing, kayaking and even boarding down volcanoes. Stroll glorious colonial Granada, explore the Mayan ruins of Copán, hike up the active crater of Cerro Negro and paddle through Caribbean mangroves.

WHO: KE Adventure Travel (017687 73966, www.keadventure.com)
WHEN: Feb, Apr, Aug, Dec 2014
HOW LONG: 13 nights
HOW MUCH: From £2,145 (incl flights)

SWEDEN

Trees, huskies and ice hotels

Get truly back to nature by combining two elemental sleeps on The Aurora Zone's *The Treehotel, Abisko and ICEHOTEL* tour. It features a duo of confounding accommodations: the towering Treehotel, suspended up amid the pines, and the sparkling ICEHOTEL, re-carved afresh from the frozen Torne River every winter. The rest of the trip will be spent in cosy Arctic-style lodges, looking for the northern lights and zipping along on exhilarating husky rides.

WHO: The Aurora Zone (01670 785012, www.theaurorazone.com)
WHEN: Flexible departures, Jan-Mar 2014
HOW LONG: Seven nights
HOW MUCH: From £2,795 (incl flights)

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Join the tribal gathering

£50 OFF Beneath the blistering tropical sun, hidden amid seemingly inaccessible jungle-clad mountains, hundreds of tribespeople gather once a year for the Mount Hagen Show. Join Peregrine Adventures' *Mt Hagen Festival Expedition* to fully immerse yourself in this primal jamboree. After flying into the Highlands from capital Port Moresby, you'll meet village chiefs, learn how to prepare a traditional meal and watch agog as the amassed tribal troupes – resplendent in feathered headdresses (*below*), striking body paint and colourful costumes – perform their sing-sings and rituals in spectacular style.

WHO: Peregrine Adventures (0845 863 9667, www.peregrineadventures.com)

WHEN: 14 Aug 2014

HOW LONG: Six nights

HOW MUCH: From £1,595 (excl flights)



50
BEST
TRIPS
2014

GHANA

Join the parade

March to the beat of Ghanaian drums on Cox & Kings *Colours of Ghana* trip. In the country's southern Ashanti region, the lively Akwasidae Festival is celebrated every sixth Sunday, and Cox & Kings group tour departures are timed to coincide. The parade of percussionists, dancers, horn-blowers and praise-singers is the highlight of this ten-day trip, which also

includes visiting Elmina Castle, canopy-walking in Kakum National Park (*above*), sailing to Nzulezo stilt village and meeting a whole host of artisans, cocoa farmers and fishermen.

WHO: Cox & Kings (0207 873 5000, www.coxandkings.co.uk)

WHEN: Seven departures in 2014

HOW LONG: Eight nights

HOW MUCH: From £2,745 (incl flights) ►



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SOUTH AFRICA

Dive with sharks

Jaws painted great whites as ferocious killers, but join Dive Worldwide's *Just Conservation: Great White Shark Study in False Bay* trip and you'll discover just how fascinating and vulnerable they are. False Bay, near Cape Town, is heaving with marine life, from Cape fur seals to sharks of all sizes. It's also the best place to see great whites breaching, and to observe these much-maligned fish from boats and by cage diving. Advanced divers can also dip under at Pyramid Rock and Partridge Point for further exhilarating encounters.

WHO: Dive Worldwide (0845 130 6980, www.diveworldwide.com)

WHEN: 24 & 31 Aug 2014

HOW LONG: 11 nights

HOW MUCH: From £3,265 (incl flights)

FALKLAND ISLANDS

March with penguins

Five different species of penguin waddle about the remote Falkland Islands, making it one of the world's best places to spot the world's most adorable birds – plus plenty more. Naturetrek's *The Falkland Islands* tour, lead by an expert naturalist, ensures you don't miss a feather. Explore capital Stanley before heading off to the key sites: see handsome

king penguins (and their chicks) at Volunteer Point, spy rockhoppers and gentoos on Sea Lion Island and find black-browed albatross on West Point, plus elephant seals on the beaches and orca offshore.

WHO: Naturetrek (01962 733051, www.naturetrek.co.uk)

WHEN: 5 Nov 2014

HOW LONG: 17 nights

HOW MUCH: From £7,495 (incl flights) ►

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BHUTAN

Search for Asia's Big Five

Walk where few have walked before: Mountain Kingdoms' *Birding & Wildlife Trek* focuses on Manas National Park, a former royal hunting reserve that's only just opened to visitors. The park is the only place where it's possible to find all of Asia's 'Big Five': Asian elephant, Asian water buffalo, one-horned rhino, leopard and Bengal tiger. The birding is brilliant too, and avian expert Chubzang Tangbi will be on hand to point out pied hornbills, pheasants, eagles and other rare species along the seldom-trodden trails.

WHO: Mountain Kingdoms

(01453 844400,

www.mountainkingdoms.com)

WHEN: 8 Feb & 6 Nov 2014

HOW LONG: 15 days

HOW MUCH: From £3,575 (incl flights)

◀ **SRI LANKA**

Get in the water with whales

Be one of only a handful of humans to have swum with the biggest creature on earth, courtesy of Natural World Safaris' *Swimming with Blue Whales* trip. Designed with serious underwater photographers (who are also confident swimmers) in mind, you'll be taken out under the expert guidance of Patrick Dykstra, spending mornings sailing out to find blue whales in eco-friendly boats; there will be just four guests per expedition, maximising the number of close encounters. As well as blues, you might well get to float with sperm whales and dolphins, too.

WHO: Natural World Safaris (01273 691642,

www.naturalworldsafaris.com)

WHEN: 1 Feb & 9 Feb 2014

HOW LONG: Nine nights

HOW MUCH: From £3,950 (excl flights)

ESTONIA

Spot Baltic birds

£50 OFF Black woodpecker, broad-billed sandpiper, citrine wagtail, great snipe – these are just a few of the avian delights you can expect to spot on Ramblers Worldwide Holidays' *Estonian Birding Adventure*. Head off on guided walks around coastal sanctuaries such as Matsalu – a key stopover for migrating geese – and Haapsalu Bay, in the Silma Nature Reserve, home to 225 species of birds. Take a break from the bins to explore medieval Tallinn, pretty seaside Parnu and Estonia's intellectual hub, Tartu.

WHO: Ramblers Worldwide

Holidays (01707 331133,

www.ramblersholidays.co.uk)

WHEN: 26 Apr & 3 May 2014

HOW LONG: Seven nights

HOW MUCH: £1,499 (incl flights)

AUSTRALIA

Sail coast to coast

Navigate Australia's wildest edges and remotest outposts on Aurora Expeditions' *Kimberley Coastline, Arnhem Land and Cape York* trip. Climb aboard the *Coral Princess* in the Western Australia city of Broome and head for Cairns – some 4,000km to the east. En route you'll explore the birdlife and beaches of the Buccaneer Archipelago, nip inland to see crocs in Kakadu NP (pictured right), sail to the arty and isolated Tiwi Islands, round Cape York (the country's northernmost point) and float along the Great Barrier Reef. Expect turtles, reef sharks, caves, waterfalls, rock paintings and real adventure.

WHO: Aurora Expeditions (+61 2 9252 1033,

www.auroraexpeditions.com)

WHEN: 6 Oct 2014 **HOW LONG:** 23 days

HOW MUCH: From US\$14,800 [approx £8,250] (excl flights)

NAMIBIA

Camp on a conservation site

£50 OFF See African conservation in action on Tracks Safaris' new *Full Moon Conservation, Wildlife and Culture*

Kaokoveld Safari. As well as rhino tracking at night, camping under the stars and likely encounters with desert elephants, lion, oryx and more, you'll sit around campfires with local people – including members of the striking Himba tribe – to learn how they live with their unique landscape and how sensitive tourism is helping them to survive.

WHO: Tracks Safaris

(01823 256630,

www.trackssafaris.co.uk)

WHEN: 11 Apr 2014

HOW LONG: 9 days

HOW MUCH: £1,995 (excl flights) ▶





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FINLAND & SWEDEN

Have a Nordic New Year

£50 OFF If your 2014 resolutions include losing weight, trying something new and generally reinvigorating your life, then Transun's *Cross Country Ski Lapland* trip could be the solution. The oh-so-fresh Arctic air of sparkling snow-sprinkled Lapland will blow away any cobwebs, while learning to Nordic ski with the help of an expert instructor will burn off that Christmas pud. Easy to pick up, cross-country skiing is one of the healthiest sports around and a brilliant way to swoosh through Finland and Sweden's unspoiled north.

WHO: Transun (01865 265 200, www.transun.co.uk)

WHEN: Jan-Mar 2014

HOW LONG: Three nights

HOW MUCH: From £799 (incl flights)

ALBANIA

Bike the Balkans

Albania is one of Europe's least-known countries – and UTrack's self-guided *Albania Cycle Adventure* is a great way to get better acquainted. This moderate-to-tough pedal takes you slowly around the sites, the most immersive and eco-friendly way to travel. Bike amid the wonderful wind-shaped trees of Llogara National Park, discover Lake

Ohrid (one of Europe's deepest lakes), find unspoilt Mediterranean beaches, explore the UNESCO-protected towns of Berati, Gjirokastër and Butrint, and experience ways of life unchanged for centuries.

WHO: UTracks (0845 241 7599, www.utracks.com)

WHEN: Flexible departures, May-Oct 2014

HOW LONG: Seven days

HOW MUCH: £930 (excl flights) ►

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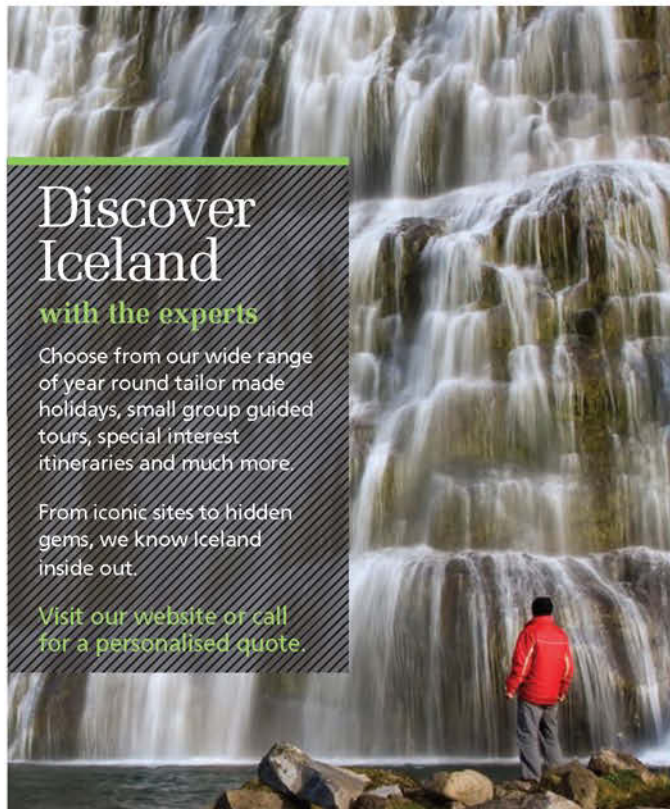
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◀ CHINA

Gallop amid the mountains

In The Saddle's *High Plateau Ride* is for those who want to take their riding to another level – quite literally. Based in Sichuan province, on the lofty Tibetan Plateau, you'll ride sturdy Tibetan mountain horses across the roof of the world. The backdrop is endless rolling plains, framed by snowcapped peaks, though the highlight is meeting the wranglers and nomads who call this land home. Out of the saddle, there's time to stop at Chengdu's Panda Breeding Centre and the ancient town of Songpan too.

WHO: In The Saddle (01299 272997, www.inthesaddle.com)

WHEN: 16 Jun, 7 & 28 Jul 2014

HOW LONG: 14 days

HOW MUCH: From £1,856 (excl flights)

BRAZIL

Hike a hidden gem

Pack your walking boots for Discover Adventure's *Chapada Diamantina & Rio Trek*. This offbeat charity fundraising challenge spends six days traversing the Chapada Diamantina National Park in northern

Brazil, which was once an active diamond-mining region – gems are still occasionally found. Even if you don't stumble on a sparkler, the scenery will dazzle: hilltop views over ravines and escarpments, tannin-rich red rivers and tumbling waterfalls (including 280m-high Cachoeirão Falls). Recuperate at local homestays each night, before celebrating your achievement in raucous Rio.

WHO: Discover Adventure (01722 718444, www.discoveradventure.com)

WHEN: 27 Sept **HOW LONG:** 12 days

HOW MUCH: £1,900 (incl flights) (Fundraising option available: £499 registration fee with fundraising target of £4,200)

AZORES

Do it all

Of the nine islands that make up the Atlantic-lapped archipelago of the Azores, São Miguel is the one that will really get your heart racing. Lush, volcanic São Miguel buzzes with adventurous possibilities, and Sunvil Discovery's *Active Azores* trip does its best to offer them all. You could set sail on a whalewatching expedition, canoe across



The only way is...
The Azores is full of
thigh-thrashing
trekking surprises

a crater lake, go canyoning in mountain steams and ravines, have a go at rock climbing, bike across a volcanic massif or jump in for a swim with a pod of dolphins. Phew!

WHO: Sunvil Discovery (020 8758 4722, www.sunvil.co.uk)

WHEN: Flexible departures

HOW LONG: Seven nights

HOW MUCH: From £1,116 (incl flights)

COLOMBIA

Challenge yourself

Feel like a true Indiana Jones on Explore's *Trek to the Lost City*. This Colombian adventure visits historic Bogotá and charming Cartagena, but the centrepiece is a five-day hike through steamy jungle to the Ciudad Perdida (the Lost City). Thought to be some 600 years older than Machu Picchu, this hidden ninth-century citadel – a network of terraces carved into mountainsides, only reachable on foot – was forgotten until the 1970s. Then it was rendered off limits by fighting in the region. Now, trips are back on – if you're up for the challenge.

WHO: Explore (0844 499 0901, www.explore.co.uk)

WHEN: 19 Apr, 9 Aug, 4 Oct & 22 Nov 2014

HOW LONG: Eight nights

HOW MUCH: £2,299 (incl flights)

INDIA

Ride the toy train

Totally India's *Dhauladhar Trek and Toy Train* tour immerses you in the beauty of Himachal Pradesh's mighty Dhauladhar Mountains without leaving you struggling for breath. The four-day hike between the scattered villages on the lip of the Himalayas – including beautiful Pragpur and Bahl – is one of the Totally India's least challenging, making it perfect for beginners. The trip also includes a ride on the Kangra Valley Railway Toy Train, on which you can take a well-earned break and watch the rhododendron-packed plains drift by.

WHO: Totally India (01992 579697, www.totallyindia.net)

WHEN: Flexible departures **HOW LONG:** Nine days
HOW MUCH: From £795 (excl flights) ▶



MONGOLIA Mix things up

Goyo Travel's *Mongolia 5 Ways* trip flies you from Ulan Bator into the middle of nowhere and sees you ride, paddle and hike your way back to civilisation. This is a recce trip across proper wilderness, so anything could happen as you and your guide travel from the remote regions of Zavkhan province towards Arkhangai, using five modes of transport – camel, horse, foot, kayak,

bicycle. Expect to discover huge dunes, hot springs, sacred mountains, monasteries, ger camps, yak-herders and who-knows-what-else along the way.

WHO: Goyo Travel (01869 866520, www.goyotravel.com)

WHEN: 14 Jun 2014

HOW LONG: 18 days

HOW MUCH: From £2,375 (excl flights)



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◀ **NEPAL****Hike & homestay
in the Himalaya**

Village Ways has been running village-to-village hikes in India for several years; from March 2014, it's taking its award-winning formula over the border. *The Magic of Nepal* trip heads to the Sailung Valley, north-east of Kathmandu and far from the tourist trail. You'll hike between three communities and a tented camp amid spectacular scenery, while crossing dramatic bridges, visiting monasteries and looking for barking deer along the way. Even better, you can share in the lives of the local people, and help provide a sustainable income in this impoverished region.

WHO: Village Ways (01223 750049, www.villageways.com)

WHEN: Tailormade, 1 Mar-15 Jun 2014

HOW LONG: Ten nights

HOW MUCH: From £847 (excl flights)

SCOTLAND**Cycle nine islands
in seven days**

First, don't panic! Although pedalling in wee-bit-hilly Scotland sounds a scary prospect, Wilderness Scotland's *Road Cycling – The Outer Hebrides* trip is suitable for almost everyone. This mostly flat ride crosses nine of these spectacular west-coast isles, taking in white-sand beaches, dramatic glens, views of craggy highlands and the most important cultural sites of the Gaelic-speaking archipelago. You might even spy a golden eagle. Nights are spent in cosy inns, with local food and a dram or two. In short, cycling in wild but splendid style.

WHO: Wilderness Scotland (01479 420020, www.wildernessscotland.com)

WHEN: 7 Jun & 26 Jul 2014

HOW LONG: Six nights

HOW MUCH: £1,195 (excl flights)

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**CHILE** Analyse the night sky

Chase shooting stars and discover divine constellations on Explorers Astronomy Tours' *Chilean Observatories* trip. Lead by Dr John Mason (former President of the British Astronomical Association), this tour visits some of the best dark skies and telescopes in the world. Survey stars from the Gemini South, La Silla and Paranal Observatories, and visit ALMA, the world's largest

astronomical project. Also, walk on the Atacama salt flats, visit the cacti-covered Elqui Valley and witness the El Tatio Geysers in explosive action.

WHO: Explorers Astronomy Tours (0845 609 1590, astronomytours.co.uk)

WHEN: 14 Oct 2014

HOW LONG: 14 days

HOW MUCH: From £3,999 (incl flights) ▶

50 BEST TRIPS 2014

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Feel the rhythm of the Caribbean on Intrepid Travel's *Cuba Music & Dance* trip. This feet-on experience pairs cultural discovery with funky sounds. From hip Havana, you'll head to pulsating Trinidad for a live dance show, to Camaguey for some

brilliant ballet instruction and to Santiago de Cuba for a spirited salsa workshop. Finish by putting your new moves to the test with professional dancers, and joining Cuban musicians in a studio to record a song. Think *X-Factor* meets *Strictly* with Latino flair!

WHO: Intrepid Travel

(0844 499 8487,

www.intrepidtravel.com)

WHEN: Thursdays, from Mar 2014

HOW LONG: Eight days

HOW MUCH: From £950 (excl flights)

◀ TURKEY

Uncover a hidden past

Patch together the turbulent history of the Lycian coast on Exclusive Escapes' *Walks with Ruins* trip. Your guide is Jeremy Seal, an author and authority on Turkey, who will help you get acquainted with the region's historic sites and their occupants throughout the centuries. Highlights include roaming the ancient city of Sidyma on sacred Mount Kragos and exploring the Greco-Roman ruins of Oenoanda.

WHO: Exclusive Escapes (020 8605 3500, www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk)

WHEN: 3 May & 4 Oct **HOW LONG:** Seven days

HOW MUCH: £1,350 (incl flights)

NORTH-WEST EUROPE

Take a Viking voyage

Skipping across Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Germany, Andante Travels' *Meet the Vikings* trip follows in the fearful footsteps of the pillaging colonists, who left an enduring mark on Europe. Led by expert Brian Ayers, you'll roam medieval York before flying to Hamburg to visit the continent's key Viking sites: the Baltic trading post of Hedeby, the ship burial at



Ladby, the reconstructed village at Foteviken and Copenhagen's excellent National Museum. At Roskilde, there's even a chance to row a Viking longship (left!)

WHO: Andante Travels (01722 713800, www.andantetravels.co.uk)

WHEN: 12 Jul 2014 **HOW LONG:** 12 nights

HOW MUCH: £3,850 (incl flights)

MADAGASCAR

Work with the wildlife

Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot – around 80% of its species are endemic. But better than just witnessing this wealth of wildlife is helping to protect it. Wildlife Worldwide's *Just Conservation – Breeding of the Greater Bamboo Lemur* trip allows you to assist Dr Patricia Wright – 'Queen of the Lemurs' – with her research in Ranomafana NP. You'll help scientists with lemur observation, behaviour monitoring, data collection and GPS tracking. You'll also visit local schools and learn about the plight of these critically endangered creatures.

WHO: Wildlife Worldwide (0845 130 6982, www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

WHEN: 1 Nov 2014 **HOW LONG:** Ten nights

HOW MUCH: From £1,995 (incl flights) 



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WIN a luxury eight-day tour of Vietnam with *Hayes and Jarvis*



When it comes to making your travel dreams a reality, consult the experts – and have a go at winning this magical competition

Fancy doing something different in 2014? Perhaps this is the year you'll finally book that African safari, that iconic US roadtrip or an exotic Latin adventure? Then you'll want to speak to Hayes and Jarvis.

For over 60 years Hayes and Jarvis has helped people explore new horizons, handpicking trips to suit every traveller – trips as unique as the person booking them.

This expertise has been poured into designing Hayes and Jarvis' eight-day Classic Vietnam tour. And, with a bit of luck – making use of Vietnam Airlines direct flights from London Gatwick to Hanoi – you could be sampling it for yourself.

VIVA VIETNAM!

Thanks to Vietnam Airlines, you can flit from the UK to the hubbub of Hanoi in just 12.5 hours. It's the perfect entry-point for an exploration of Vietnam. Stroll the narrow streets of the Old Town, where the city's French and Chinese heritage is still evident, and visit the Temple of Literature, historic Ba Dinh Square and the One-Pillar Pagoda.

After the city bustle, this well-paced itinerary slows down at UNESCO-listed Halong Bay. Board an overnight cruise to sail amid the 3,000 limestone islets, floating villages and grottoes. You can also have a go at paddling a kayak, practising t'ai chi on deck and learning to make traditional spring rolls.

THE PEARL OF THE EAST

Rejoin civilisation by taking a short flight from Hanoi to the charming old trading post of Hoi An. The town is rich in historic architecture; you can even discover how silk is made at the nearby Silk Village. The former Imperial City of Hue is another gem. Here, enjoy excursions along the Perfume River and a tour of the city's UNESCO-listed Citadel.

End your journey in Ho Chi Minh City, a short flight away. Explore old Saigon, browse lively Ben Thanh Market and delve into the Cu Chi Tunnels (macabre remnants of the Vietnam War). Finally, head up the Bitexco Financial Tower, the tallest building in Ho Chi Minh City, for 260m-high views – a stylish spot to bid farewell to this thrilling, diverse, dynamic country.

Competition

Hayes and Jarvis are offering a reader and their companion the chance to win an eight-day trip to Vietnam. Simply answer the following:

Q: The UNESCO World Heritage site of Halong Bay is closest to which of these Vietnamese cities?

- a) Hanoi
- b) Hue
- c) Ho Chi Minh City

To enter, and for full terms & conditions, visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/competitions or send your answer, name and contact info on a postcard to the Wanderlust office (p2). Closing date for entries is 10 February 2014. State 'no offers' if you'd rather not be contacted by Wanderlust or the sponsors.

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133 YANGON



135 NIAGARA FALLS



137 AVIGNON

Competition

WIN a ten-day trip to the Kingdom Of Swaziland – Africa's biggest little secret

Ancient rituals, rare rhinos, rugged ranges: welcome to Swaziland

Swaziland encompasses the best of Africa in one neat package. This tiny nation – landlocked to the north-east of South Africa – packs an assortment of adventures, landscapes and pre-colonial heritage into an area smaller than Wales.

Swaziland – a land apart

Swaziland is one of Africa's last remaining monarchies, and is bursting with tradition. Witness vigorous Sibhaca dancing at Mantenga Cultural Village; or take in the Umhlanga Festival, when thousands of women perform the 'reed dance' for the king. Equally as lively is the Great Usuthu River, which flows east through valleys and mountainous rainforest, perfect for rafters and trekkers. For a different take on the highlands, venture to the Shewula Mountain Camp, a community-run ecotourism hotspot that gives visitors the chance to experience authentic daily life while benefiting local people. There are some wonderful places to stay too, including the famous Foresters Arms – a quintessential country house hotel deep in the forests of Swaziland.

Wild & wonderful

Swaziland has plenty to satisfy safari-goers too. Track down big game in the hot, dry lowveld or seek out birds in the rocky highveld. Then begin your search for black and white rhino at the Mkhaya Game Reserve – the black rhino is nearing extinction, having long been hunted for its horns, but Swaziland is something of a refuge for this endangered species.

In short, Swaziland punches well above its weight. "It's a revelation," confirms Nick Boulos, regular *Wanderlust* contributor and the British Travel Press Awards' Travel Writer of the Year, who recently visited Swaziland. "Not only are the potential wildlife encounters extraordinary, but the people are just as wonderful." Intrigued? Look out for Nick's article later this year – and try winning a trip there to see it for yourself...

How to enter

Sense Africa, South African Airways and the Swaziland Tourism Authority have joined forces to offer you a ten-day holiday for two to The Kingdom of Swaziland, including flights, transfers and accommodation. To enter, just answer this simple question:

Q: Which of Swaziland's regions covers the north-western part of the country?

- (a) Lubombo
- (b) Hhohho
- (c) Shiselwini

To enter, and for full terms and conditions, visit www.thekingdomofswaziland.com/competition. Travel must be within 2014 and is based on availability. Closing date is 10 February 2014. Please state 'no offers' if you'd rather not be contacted by *Wanderlust* or the sponsors.



For more information go to www.thekingdomofswaziland.com

South African Airways

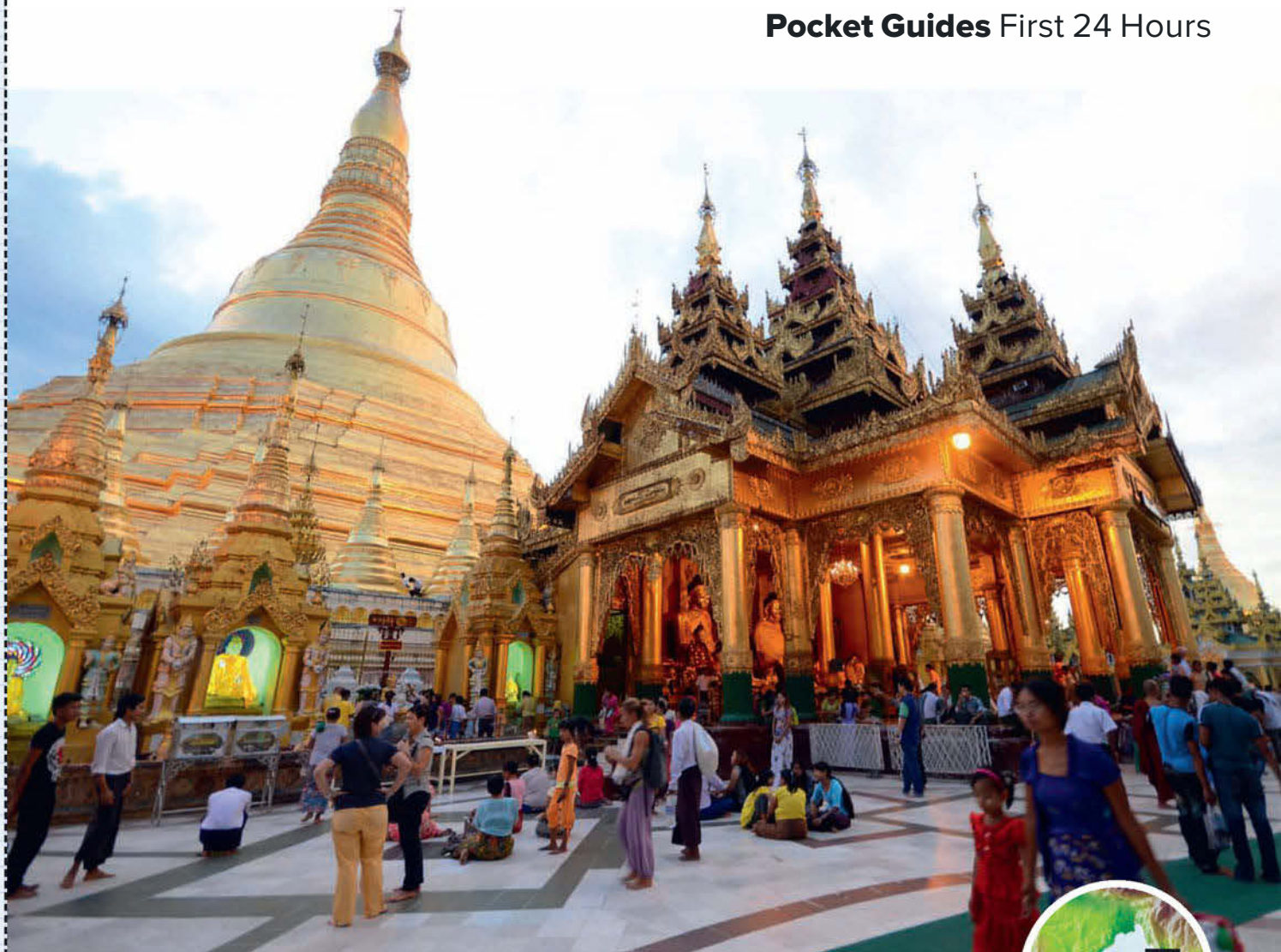
South African Airways bring the world to Africa and take Africa to the world. Multi-award winning, SAA offer double daily overnight flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg; the hub through which Swaziland is reached.

Tel: 0844 3759680 Web: www.flysaa.com



Sense Africa

Sense Africa is the only Swaziland specialist in the UK and there is nothing they do not know about this incredible Kingdom. They provide tailor-made safaris and adventures with a personal and professional touch, giving an experience of the real Africa away from the hubbub of mass tourism. Tel: 01275 877172 Email: jenny@senseafrica.co.uk Web: www.senseafrica.co.uk



Yangon, Burma

Dazzling pagodas, mouth-watering food, tantalising market stalls – life in Burma’s fascinating former capital truly feels golden, says **Phoebe Smith**

i Before you arrive

On arrival at Yangon airport a sign announces that you’ve reached the ‘City of Gold’ – but by that point you’ll already know. One glance out of the plane window will have revealed the smatter of gilded pagodas, either reflecting sunshine or illuminated by spotlights at night, that give the city its sobriquet.

These Buddhist temples are the most obvious treasures in the city; a visit to them is practically mandatory – especially to the most famous, Shwedagon Pagoda (*above*). However, there’s so much more to see. Stroll around Inya Lake (it was in a waterfront property here that Aung San Suu Kyi was held under house arrest); explore the leafy downtown streets lined with crumbling colonial architecture (remnants of British rule); and visit 70-year-old Scott Market, which is filled with jewels, *longyi* skirts and souvenirs. Your 24 hours will whizz by before you know it.

✈ At the airport

British citizens require a visa, which must be obtained before arrival (see Essential Info, overleaf). On the plane, you’ll be given an arrival/departure card; fill it in before you land – you will need the address of your first night’s hotel and your flight dates/numbers.

At the airport you must pass immigration. Your photograph will be taken and you’ll be given the departure part of your card; keep this to hand in when you leave the country. Next, claim your bags, which will be scanned before you finally enter the Arrivals hall.

In Arrivals there are money exchange desks where you get local kyats; the exchange rate is only a little lower than in town, so it’s a good option. Take US dollars to change – bigger bills get a slightly better rate.

On departure you can change any remaining currency at a desk just after immigration.

🚗 Getting into town

Taxis are readily available and the cost of the ride into the city is low: expect to pay around 10,000kyat (£6.30) or around US\$10 – drivers gladly take dollars. Agree on the fare before you start your journey.

🚆 Other ways to arrive

Currently the only land border crossings available to foreigners wanting to enter Burma are via Thailand. There are four options: Tachileik (the northernmost crossing), Myawaddy (east of Yangon), Htee Kee (the most remote) and Kawthaung (the southernmost).

Visa rules change all the time (and should be checked before departure) but currently, unless you’re content with only a day trip to Burma and don’t intend to leave the town area you arrive in, then you will need to organise a Burma visa pre-trip (see Essential info). ►

◀ HERE'S THE PLAN...

■ Essential Info

Population: 5.9 million

Language: Burmese, plus around 100 tribal languages and dialects. Some English spoken in towns and tourist areas.

Timezone: GMT+6.5

International dialling code: +95

Visas: Required by UK nationals. Apply in advance at the Myanmar Embassy in London (19a Charles St, London W1J 5DX; www.myanmarembassy.com). Processing time is around seven

days; visas, valid for a four-week stay in the country, cost £14.

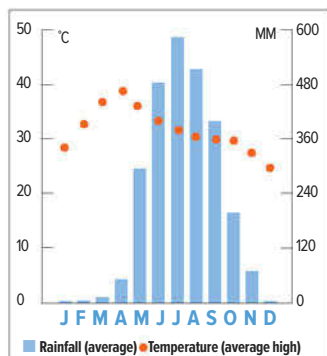
Best viewpoint: Grab a bite at the Thiripyitsaya Sky Bistro in the Sakura Tower for 360-degree views of Yangon – the food may not be five-star but the panorama definitely is.

Health issues: Do not drink the tap water: buy sealed, bottled water or purify your own. Dengue fever is a problem – avoid mosquito bites by using repellent and covering your arms and legs.

Recommended guidebooks:

Myanmar (Insight Guides, 2013)
Historical Walks in Yangon: Heritage Trust Guide Map (Silkworm, 2010)

Climate: Winter (November–February) is the dry season, when rainfall is lowest and temperatures reach highs of around 32°C; it's also peak tourist season. March–May is the most oppressively hot period – it can reach the high 30°Cs or even the low 40°Cs. Late May/June to September/October is monsoon season.



■ First Day's Tour

Head downtown to **Sule Pagoda**, the gold stupa that now acts as a roundabout to Yangon traffic. From there, explore the nearby streets on foot to admire the mix of buildings. Look out for the colonial Strand Hotel and City Hall among others.

Now it's time to shop. With over 2,000 stalls under one roof, **Bogyoke Aung San Market** (aka Scott's Market) is the perfect place to spend your newly changed kyat on everything from 'I heart Myanmar' T-shirts to tribal handicrafts. Keep an eye on the time – it's easy to lose track here.

By now you'll have built up an appetite, so aim for **Feel Myanmar Food** (124 Pyihtaungsu St), where you can try a range of excellent value Burmese dishes (around US\$1 each). It's popular with the locals but don't let the queues put you off.

Now fully refuelled, check out the **National Museum** (Pyay Rd).

It's badly lit, and forget finding labels, but it's worth a stroll to see the country's relics.



Next up, stroll by one of Yangon's two lakes. The smaller (**Kandawgyi**) is closer and more popular with tourists. The larger (**Inya**) is where the locals go.

End your day by grabbing some food from a market stall en route to the **Shwedagon Pagoda** (entrance US\$8). Here you can watch the sun set, see the monks gather and chat to the locals, who will undoubtedly want to practise their English and welcome you to Myanmar.

TOP TIP

As a general rule, people are more than happy to pose for photographs, even monks at the Buddhist sites. Just remember to ask first and be ready for them to want to photograph you too!



■ Where to Stay

Accommodation in Yangon is expensive, and price doesn't always reflect quality. There are plenty of comfortable options though, no matter what your budget.

Top end: If you want a place that oozes history then it's got to be **The Strand** (hotelthestrand.com). Built by the British in 1901, it's full of colonial charm and offers a range of suites as well as a spa. Doubles from around US\$400.

Mid range: With friendly staff, a good location near Bogyoke Market and great

views of the Shwedagon Pagoda from the breakfast room, the **Asia Plaza Hotel** (asiaplazahotel.com) is a good choice. Doubles from US\$120.

Budget: Finding somewhere cheap and clean can be tricky but the **Motherland Inn 2** (myanmarmotherlandinn.com) manages both. It's a walk or short taxi ride to the main attractions but given that free airport pick-up and breakfast are included from just US\$25 a night, who's complaining?

■ Stay or Go

With so many other attractions in the rest of the country calling you (Inle Lake, Mandalay, Bagan, the Myeik Archipelago – to name just a few), it can be tempting to leave Yangon immediately after arriving. However, spare at least a couple of days to explore the city. It may no longer be the capital (in 2006, the military government shifted that role to Naypyidaw) but it certainly feels like one and offers the best intro to Burma before your wanderlust takes you further.

If you get itchy feet then nearby **Bago**, 80km north-east of Yangon, is worth considering for a day trip. It's easily reached by bus or, more conveniently, taxi; the journey takes a couple of hours. Bago is home to the tallest pagoda in the world (Shwemawdaw) and the huge reclining Shwethalyaung Buddha, which dates back to AD994. A little further east is Kyaiktiyo Pagoda, an iconic Buddhist stupa built atop a precariously balanced golden boulder.



Niagara Falls, Canada

From 2014, the iconic *Maid of the Mist* boats will stop running from the Canadian side of Niagara – so what next for these ferocious falls? Be first to find out...

Get orientated

The thunderous roar of Niagara can be heard for miles around. This mighty waterfall straddles the Canadian and US border, a loud, liquid Goliath raging between the province of Ontario and the state of New York.

Niagara is comprised of three cascades: Horseshoe Falls, which receives around 90% of the Niagara River's flow; American Falls; and slender Bridal Veil Falls. On average, 168,000 cubic metres of water pours over the cliffs here every minute. And herein lies the appeal: although Niagara is only around 57m at its highest point (more than 500 other falls are taller), its sheer volume of churning water makes it one of the world's most impressive.

Getting there

The falls are 130km south-west of Toronto. Several airlines fly direct from the UK to Toronto

including Swiss International Airlines (swiss.com); returns cost from around £513 return and flight time is about eight hours.

Buses from Toronto to the falls take around 95 minutes; tickets with Megabus (ca.megabus.com) cost from C\$13 (£7.50) one way. Trains also link Toronto and Niagara (viarail.ca); journey time is around two hours. Alternatively, hire a car.

Buffalo, 42km from Niagara, is the closest airport on the US side. Indirect flights from the UK to Buffalo with US Airways (usairways.com) cost from around £520 return. Various shuttle services run from the airport to the falls (see buffaloairport.com); it's a 30-minute drive.

To cross between the US and Canadian sides (via the Rainbow Bridge), you will need your passport. A toll (cars from \$3.50; pedestrians 50¢) must be paid. British citizens do not need a visa to cross, but do need a valid ESTA to enter the USA (see <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov>).

The visit

Maid of the Mist boat tours (pictured above) first launched in 1846; for over 150 years they have been *the* way to experience the falls up close. However, October 2013 marked the *Maid's* final voyage from the Canadian side. From spring 2014, two 700-passenger state-of-the-art Hornblower catamarans will replace the old icons (www.niagaracruises.com). The classic 'Voyage To The Falls' will depart every 15 minutes from the Canadian docks; there are also new 'Sunset Cocktail Cruises' and a 'Falls Illumination Cruise', which coincides with the nightly light display. Adult tickets cost C\$19.95 (15-20min day tour) and C\$29.95 (30-40min night tour).

Get a different perspective via the 'Journey Behind the Falls' tour. A lift at the brink of Horseshoe Falls takes you down and behind the tumbling water (C\$11.25 [£6.40]). For more, see www.niagarafallstourism.com. ►

◀ Niagara Falls

Formed by glaciation around 12,000 years ago, the falls were originally seven miles downriver in Lewiston, NY. In their current spot, Goat Island splits the Niagara River into twin channels just upstream from the cascades: the majority of the water tumbles over Horseshoe Falls, with a comparatively small amount plunging down American and Bridal Veil Falls. The deepest part of the river is directly below the falls and, at 52m, is almost as deep as the gorge banks are high.



◆ American Falls

**Around 10% of the
Niagara River's flow
tumbles over 260m-wide
American Falls and
adjacent Bridal Veil Falls.**

◆ Horseshoe Falls

Almost entirely in Canada, this is the largest and most iconic cascade, measuring 670m wide and 57m high.



◆ Goat Island



◆ Rainbow Bridge

From this elegant span there are panoramic views across to the falls; on sunny days, you might see rainbows rise through the spray. The bridge not only crosses the gorge – it connects Canada and the US.



◆ Clifton Hill

This street boasts a range of tourist attractions – including a Ripley's Believe it or Not museum (see the dog with human teeth!).



◆ Hornblower catamaran

Replacing the *Maid of the Mist*, these all-mod-cons vessels will start operating in spring 2014.



◆ Journey Behind the Falls

An elevator from the brink of Horseshoe Falls descends to a series of rocky tunnels that take visitors behind the wall of water.



◆ Skylon Tower

This tower has a 236m-high observation deck, which gives a bird's-eye view of the falls. It is also open at night so visitors can look down on the floodlit waters.

■ Essentials



Language: English/French
Time: GMT-5 (Mar-Oct GMT-4) in Toronto
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Canadian dollar (C\$), currently around C\$1.7 to the UK£
Health: Excellent medical facilities; costs can be high and there are no special arrangements for British visitors. Take out good insurance.

This feature is adapted from *DK Eyewitness Canada* guide (£16.99), the best visual guide to the country. www.traveldk.com

Walks at Niagara Falls

The White Water Walk is a great way to admire the falls from the bottom of the canyon. It provides a close-up view of the treacherous whirlpools and rapids, as well as the ancient rock formations of the Niagara Gorge. Visitors descend via a lift and a tunnel, which lead from the top of the gorge to a riverside boardwalk. The walk is 305m long (with stairs) and leads to two observation decks at the edge of the river. Entry costs **C\$10.95 (£6.30)** for adults.





Papal views
The Pope's Palace
overlooks the
Avignon Bridge



Avignon, France

Fancy getting away greener in 2014? The historic and gastronomic Provençal city of Avignon is an easy train away and ideal for a long weekend, says **Sarah Baxter**

If the Pope wanted to get from the UK to Avignon, he'd be advised to catch a train. Not only would all his regalia cost a fortune in airline excess baggage, but the old papal city – 14th-century capital of the Catholic church – is just better reached by rail.

It takes from just 5.5 hours to whizz down to the Provençal hub from St Pancras: a greener, swifter more scenic option than flying, since there are almost no direct flights from the UK to Avignon's airport. Leave London before sunrise and by lunch you can be drinking a glass of Côtes du Rhône by the banks of that very river.

Tucked into a bend on the right bank of the Rhône, Avignon has been occupied for around 5,000 years. Its strategic position made it a key Roman trading post, but it was a pack of popes who really put it on the map. In 1309, with Rome in political chaos, Pope Clement V decamped from Italy to the safety of southern

France. Six subsequent popes used the city as their base until 1378, when a split in the church ended the Avignon Papacy, although the city remained papal property until 1791's revolutionary upheaval.

Those men in cassocks left quite a legacy. Their residence, the Palais des Papes – begun in 1335 and constructed in less than 20 years – is the biggest Gothic palace in Europe. Now the city's must-see sight, its 15,000 sq m of floorspace is enclosed within bulky crenellated ramparts that still dominate the city today.

However, it's a city of several parts. Labyrinthine old Avignon intramuros, protected within still-intact medieval walls, is home to the Palais, many museums and innumerable bars and restaurants – ranging from tourist-bland to Michelin-starred. There's also a profusion of theatres, though cultural activity really peaks during July's three-week-long Festival

d'Avignon, when 1,000 performances are held across the city.

On the opposite bank of the Rhône, and in a different region of France (Languedoc-Roussillon rather than Provence) is Villeneuve-lès-Avignon – only this 'new' town is pretty ancient too. It was granted city status in 1293 to guard the western side of the 900m-long Saint-Bénézet Bridge – the famed 22-arch 'Pont d'Avignon' that once spanned the river. The popes would retreat here for some peace; indeed, Pope Innocent VI founded an impressive monastery here. Villeneuve is still a quiet alternative to Avignon, though the bridge has mostly gone – just four of its arches still stand – and modern Avignon suburbs now sprawl around these two old centres. Further beyond that is a landscape striped by vineyards and dotted with hilltop towns. Plenty to fill a fine short break, with some added romance of the rails. ►

HERE'S THE PLAN...

Essential Info

When to go: The annual Theatre Festival means the city is heaving in July. Spring and autumn are best for sightseeing.

Getting there: Travel by train. London-Avignon requires a change in Lille or Paris – except in summer when there's a weekly direct service – but it's a fast journey (from around 5.5 hours). Returns cost from £119 (0844 848 5848, raileurope.co.uk). Few airlines fly direct from the UK to Avignon Caumont Airport (8km away); Flybe (flybe.com) does fly once-weekly from Birmingham and Southampton.

Getting around: Old Avignon is walkable. Buses (singles €1.30) run from outside the city walls to the TGV train station (3km) and Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (3km). There's a free (seasonal) ferry across the river, from near the Pont d'Avignon, to Barthelasse Island.

Where to stay: House Trip offers a range of local apartments (from £21pn; housetrip.com). Hôtel de Garlande is a charming small hotel (doubles from €74; hoteldegarlande.com).



For something swankier, try the Hôtel d'Europe (doubles from €214; heurope.com).

Where to eat: Grab a tartine (open sandwich) at Ginette & Marcel (25 Place des Corps Saints). Eat excellent French dishes at Fou de Fafa (17 Rue des Trois Faucons, *above*). Le Barrio (13 Rue des Infirmeries) is a good local joint.

Further info: www.avignon-tourisme.com

Day 1 AVIGNON

Stroll around old Avignon. The prime pleasure of the walled medieval city is getting lost down its backstreets – though the tourist office (41 Cours Jean Jaurès) has helpful walking-tour maps. The canal-lined Rue des Teinturiers (Dyers' Street) and Rue Peyrollerie (squeezed under the Palais des Papes) are just two worth finding.

Fuel your walking at Les Halles (open Tues-Sun, from 6am), the main market hall, which has a living, plant-draped facade and an interior packed with fresh produce.

Next, acquire a free Avignon Pass – from the tourist office or a participating venue. With this, you pay full price to enter your first museum, then get up to 50% off every subsequent entrance fee. Top tip: visit the Musée Lapidaire first – this repository of local archaeological finds, housed in a 17th-century Jesuit college, only costs €2 to enter: the cheapest place to pay full price.

Other museums worth a look include the Calvert (for art) and the small but atmospheric Louis



Voulard. However, the main draw is the domineering 14th-century Palais des Papes (€10.50; palais-des-papes.com). This enormous Gothic pile was once the seat of the Catholic church, and is suitably grand. An audio guide explains the stories behind the frescoed chambers and vaulted chapels.

After the palace, walk up nearby Rocher des Doms – this lofty park has fine views over the river. Then drop down to Rue des Escaliers Sainte-Anne for a drink at Utopia-La Manutention, a hip cinema-bar-restaurant just outside the palace walls.

TOP TIP

For a different perspective on the Palais des Papes, book a Secret Palace tour, which permits access to areas usually off limits to visitors (English tours available Fridays, 3pm, Sept-Oct; €24).



Day 2 EXPLORE THE NEW-OLD CITY

Explore Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, the 'new' city – which isn't new at all. To get there, walk or take Bus 5, which leaves from Avignon's Porte de l'Oulle; disembark at the F Mistral stop.

Walk down Rue de la République. Browse the gifts and olive oils (pressed on site) at Moulin à Huile before visiting La Chartreuse, the 14th-century monastery founded by Pope Innocent VI. This atmospheric complex of cloisters, cells and gardens now hosts theatre performances.

There is a walking trail from here up to Fort St-André (*above*). This formidable walled bastion once protected 190 dwellings; most are now in ruins, but there are great views over Avignon and Provence – on a clear day

you can see Mont Ventoux. You can also visit the Benedictine abbey.

After this lofty lookout, wind down the pretty old streets to the main square (lined with pleasant cafés) and pass Notre Dame church. Continue south to the medieval Tour Philippe le Bel, which once marked the western end of the Pont d'Avignon. A steep climb up the 39m-high tower yields more good views.

Walk back over the Rhône to old Avignon. Or walk halfway – to Île de la Barthelasse – to enjoy a stroll alongside the river and to ride the free shuttle boat over to the stunted Pont d'Avignon. Here, a visit to the bridge's museum details its history and lets you dance upon its remaining arches, made famous in an (irritatingly catchy) children's song.

Day 3 HEAD INTO WINE COUNTRY

The Provençal countryside beckons, a land of abundant vineyards and precariously perched hilltop villages, dominated by that nemesis of many a Tour de France cyclist, 1,909m Mont Ventoux.

You could take a bus or train (40/20mins) to Orange, to explore the small, lively city's well-preserved Roman theatre and triumphal arch. Buses also connect Orange and Avignon to Châteauneuf du Pape – the village capital of the renowned wine region, which is dominated by a ruined papal castle.

The Châteauneuf du Pape appellation is one of France's most revered, so this is the place to swill, sip and slurp: many local wine shops

offer dégustation gratuite (free tastings), as does the informative Musée du Vin.

As buses are infrequent (and it would seem a waste to self-drive), it's easiest to book a taxi or a tour. Avignon Tourism offers a half-day Chateaux & Domaines trip, including two tastings at Châteauneuf vineyards (from €60pp); Viator's five-hour Orange & Châteauneuf small-group tour combines Roman ruins with tipples in the terroir (from £50pp; viator.com).

For a more intimate interaction with the landscape, hire a bike (from €12 a day; provence-bike.com), to velo around the vines or take a pedal along the banks of the Rhône.

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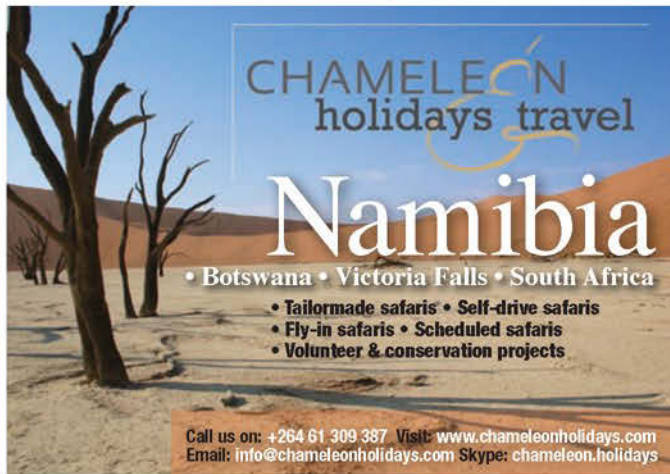
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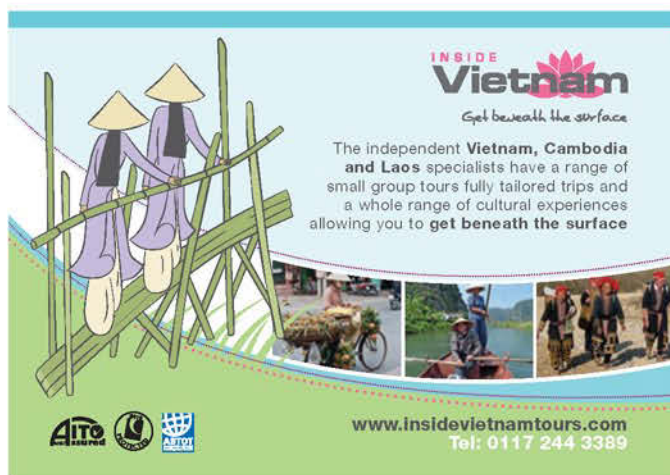
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Sundowners Overland

Liz Anderson

Managing Director of Sundowners Overland, celebrating its 50 year anniversary in 2014

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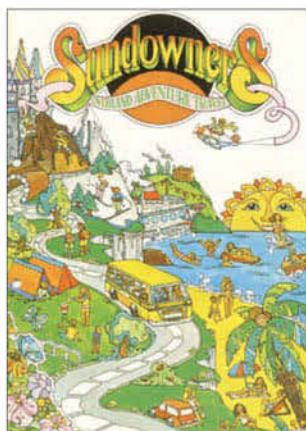
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Future plans?

We will continue to take advantage of areas that open up, either via traveller preference or political expediency. Western Mongolia and southern Siberia, as well as some of the more far-flung areas of Central Asia, hold great interest to us. While we've traditionally focused on east-west routes there are also possibilities north-south, from the Arabian Gulf to the Baltic Sea or from Southern India to Murmansk. Whether in this decade or the next, this continues to give us the chance to share Asia overland, differently.

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Photographer: **Astrium satellite**

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